

PAUL'S POLITICAL COLUMN

With Paul Atkinson

'We are in the slow car-crash of neoliberalism's demise.' I find myself repeating it like a mantra, as if I know what I'm saying and it carries meaning. I don't, and it doesn't. It's an expletive. It takes up space where there should be tears.

The four of us are in our 70s, 'the old geezers' group', we call ourselves in the subject box of our emails. All psychotherapists in various states of professional withdrawal and physical distress, annoying and delighting each other as we swap stories of the past and present, and roll out before each other the well-worn carpets of our everyday wisdom. Death is coming for us, and it is an enormous pleasure to be alive together.

Perhaps *we* are the slow car-crash of failing bodies and minds.

But is it only those of us who have lived three score and ten in the UK, born after the last world war and never called upon to fight or survive war ourselves, who feel so profoundly incredulous at how the world has changed since the turn of the millennium?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is the latest blow to our liberal bubble of relative security and complacency. On the whole, in Europe, war has been someone else's first-hand horror, to be condemned as profoundly inhumane, violent and usually criminal. How small, privileged and blind that bubble has been. Since the year 2000, wars fought on Middle Eastern soil involving the armies of the West and its allies have killed up to 2,000,000 people. Most have been civilians; people like you and me.

Throughout recorded history there has *always* been a war going on somewhere. Wikipedia lists 90-odd wars around the world that have each

killed more than 25,000 people since 1900, and close to 150 that have killed fewer.

The ubiquity and archetypal grip of war is explored by James Hillman in *A Terrible Love of War* (Penguin, 2005, p. 2):

If it is a primordial component of Being, then war fathers the very structure of existence and our thinking about it: our ideas of the universe, of God, of ethics; war determines the thought patterns of Aristotle's logic of opposites, Kant's antinomies, Darwin's natural selection, Marx's struggle of classes and even Freud's repression of the id by the ego and super-ego. We think in warlike terms, feel ourselves at war with ourselves, and unknowingly believe predation, territorial defence, conquest, and the interminable battle of opposing forces are the ground rules of existence....

Who is to say that at this point in history, the love of war might not take hold in Europe again and wipe us all out in a renewal of primitive forms of nationalism, and the clash of dying and resurgent empires? I am old enough to remember my father's fear of being called up again during the 1950s Suez stand-off, and the suspension of collective breath during the Cuba Missile Crisis of the early 1960s.

I want to say: 'But this is the work of the political class, our so-called leaders. We ordinary citizens do not want war, torture, violence and suffering. We just want to get on with our everyday lives.' It's not quite true, though, is it? People vote for war, sometimes with good reason, but mainly out of a terrible, perverse love of violence. And people either actively or passively support democide, the murder of people by their own government and its agents. In fact, globally, democide has

resulted in six times more deaths than war over the last century.

In the UK since 2000, death and significant damage to mind and body at the hands of government policies has been on the increase.

There have been over 160,000 deaths due to Covid since March 2020, many attributable to the Conservative government's incompetence, corruption and negligence. Some 1.3 million have contracted long Covid, according to self-reports of chronic symptoms. People with learning disabilities are eight times more likely to die of Covid. People of colour suffer higher sickness and death rates. Neglect has been one of the biggest killers in care homes.

Waiting-lists for both physical and mental health treatment have mushroomed during the pandemic, building on policies of cuts, understaffing and denial of care in the National Health Service for over a decade. People are dying of cancer and other serious illnesses on these waiting-lists. Child and young adult mental health services are routinely turning young people away, regardless of the severity of their symptoms. Some 7 per cent of 17 year olds have attempted suicide; nearly a quarter have self-harmed.

Covid-19 has exposed many of the ongoing symptoms of cumulative malaise and breakdown in our society. But Covid is not their cause. Nor is the war in Ukraine, the European Union, the financial crash, immigration, the 'mental health crisis' or Trumpism.

The immiseration, emotional torture and neglect of a growing proportion of the population have been in progress for some time, and are being tolerated as a feature of the neoliberal landscape by the English electorate – judging by twelve years of Tory (Conservative) barbarism and the loud rejection of the only real challenge to capitalist business-as-usual this century in the 2019 general election.

I remember hearing the word 'democide' for the first time during the psycho-compulsion campaign in 2016, when activists talked about the unacknowledged democide of people on benefits with physical and mental health disabilities. The torture of Work Capability and Personal Independence Payment assessments still continues, and workfare policies have been replacing welfare policies now for more than three decades.

Child poverty, with a brief intermission under Tony Blair/Gordon Brown, has been rising since 1980. We all know that income and wealth inequalities have massively polarised since Margaret Thatcher, while average real wages have been more or less stagnant. Council-house building fell from around 120,000 new homes a year in the 1970s to virtually zero by 1992. Around 20 per cent of the population lives in private rented property – twice the number in the year 2000. Unsecured household debt has doubled over the last 30 years. Homelessness in London has tripled since 2010. The prison population of England & Wales quadrupled in size between 1900 and 2018 – with half of this increase taking place since 1990.

Health inequalities among different ethnic minority groups have also been highlighted by the Covid pandemic, but we know that institutional racism, income, wealth and health inequality across ethnic background have been with us for decades. On the mental health front, black and brown people are more likely to be diagnosed with psychosis, more likely to be under Community Treatment Orders, and less likely to get good quality care from mental health services. By voting for the Tories, we have supported draconian, xenophobic immigration policies and former Home Secretary Theresa May's 'hostile environment'. The ongoing Windrush scandal and the UK's treatment of asylum seekers escaping theatres of war and economic destitution are shameful beyond forbearance.

Poverty, punitive welfare policies and cuts in health and social care kill people, make us ill, destroy our psychological balance, shorten our lives, and drive us to despair, madness and violence of one kind or another. Austerity policies after the financial crash of 2008 are calculated to have killed tens of thousands of people. Now, on top of a pandemic we have another economic crisis, fuelled once again by the mindless avarice and extractive ideologies of the masters of our 'democracy', and again the cost of which will fall on the poorest, while the wealthy receive the dividend of crisis. And in the background, our planet burns and suffocates.

I am not a particularly pessimistic person. I still have faith in the human spirit, love, and our capacity to create, to care and find joy in the miracle of being alive in a universe of infinite energy. This God-forsaken world we have created, in which the transactions of money, acquisition, self-help and hyper-judgement of ourselves and each other – surely this world is spiralling out of control. We are living the serial crisis of the end of an era – hopefully, not the end of the human project. It's not getting closer. It has arrived. We are in it, living it.

If, for a moment, we allow the rather simplistic imagery of the slow car-crash of neoliberal capitalism – something that I suspect is as good a summation of the macro-present as any –

where might we be heading? Of course, I have no idea. Apart from anything else, how could a septuagenarian, middle-class whitey living in London dare to guess which fork in the road a burning car without brakes or gear-box, with a blacked-out windscreen and broken rear-view mirrors, is going to take?

But, please God, though I will probably not be around to see it, may it turn out to be a road of love.

About the contributor



Paul Atkinson has been wild swimming in the intersection of psychotherapy and political activism since the early 1970s – admittedly with many spells of apathy, despair and watching telly. He has five grandchildren, and helped set up the Free Psychotherapy Network.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“The ideology of neoliberalism, with its... emphasis on consumption, its elimination of basic apparatuses that can provide alternative points of view, has been so powerful and so normalized.... Under neoliberalism, culture appears to have largely abandoned its role as a site of critique. [Its] cheerleaders work hard to normalize dominant institutions and relations of power through a vocabulary and public pedagogy that create market-driven subjects, modes of consciousness, and ways of understanding the world that promote accommodation, quietism and passivity.”

Henry Giroux (1943–)