

# Deaths and COVID-19: Talk, Silence and Alternative Realities

## Introduction

At the time of beginning to write this article in early 2022, a letter was published in *The Guardian* newspaper on the silence surrounding Covid deaths. 'Why are we pretending that Covid is over?' ran the headline, as the letter's author asked:

How can the UK be in a "very good position" on Covid, as Sajid Javid says, when people are still falling ill and even dying or being left disabled from this dangerous virus...How can a man who makes such statements even though about 1,200 have people died in the last fortnight be our health minister? What is wrong with the country? Why are so many people complicit in the minimising of the pandemic and accepting of this reckless and negligent government policy that has abandoned sane, basic public health measures? (Couch, 2022).

The article addresses this question through critically considering a number of issues.

First, it discusses the data concerning the number of Covid deaths in the UK from March 2020. This empirical detail is important in and of itself as it illustrates how the Covid death rate was socially constructed and categorized by government Ministers, to the point where, by April 2022, 'learning to live with Covid', *not* the spiraling number of deaths, had become the government's overriding message.

Second, it analyses the relentless, and often-deceitful, attempts by the Johnson government, to socially construct a definition of reality - their 'truth' - about these deaths. Inevitably, as the paper shows, the government's 'talk' about the virus, and the death rate, not only unscrupulously massaged, minimized and mystified the number of deaths but also, two years into the pandemic, Ministers, with the often-uncritical support of the mass media, were relentless in their attempts to push the issue down the news agenda (XXX, 2021).

Third, using the theoretical framework developed by Thomas Mathiesen (2004), the article focusses on the other side of government 'talk' - which had been the primary means of communication during the first two years of the pandemic - namely the corrosive, hidden, silencing techniques which were mobilized by Ministers. The desired impact of these techniques was the attempt to relegate the dead to the periphery of political and popular consciousness. The article uses Mathiesen's framework to consider the *specific* and *shifting* mechanisms of silencing used by the government to control the narrative around the number of dead.

Fourth, while Mathiesen correctly conceptualises silencing as a form of subjugation which attempts to ensure acquiescence, this strategy has not succeeded in terms of achieving hegemony. The Government's Covid 'truth' has been contested, challenged and resisted. This

point is exemplified by the ongoing struggles of bereaved families to establish an alternative truth about the deaths of their relatives (XXX, 2021).

Throughout the article, an implicit reference point is to view conflict over the appropriate management of the pandemic as a struggle around the appropriate level of state regulation to mitigate harms. Our focus here is on the role of the state, although to the extent that the thrust of the paper is the ways in which the state has sought to construct the end of the pandemic, then clearly the general corporate interest of a return to 'business as usual' is also central, if implicit.

Typically, regulation is understood as a means of 'controlling' harm – often in the form of state efforts to mitigate corporate harms; in the context of Covid, regulation is viewed in the context of attempts to mitigate harms to public health. Both views entail an understanding of regulation as involving *restrictions*. On a different view, one developed by a school of neo-Marxist thought on regulation (Bernat and Whyte, 2017, Tombs and Whyte, 2015, Whyte, 2014), such efforts in capitalist societies **appear as much to be** about social order maintenance as about control or restrictive efforts *per se*. According to these theorists, regulation maintains the steady rate and function of the machinery of industry and commerce. (Whyte, 2004, 2015) As such, its purpose is to seek a stable and uninterrupted system of production, distribution and consumption. The consequence of looking at regulation from this perspective is to recognise that regulation by the state *may* ameliorate harm, but that may not be its primary purpose. In other words, regulation through the state in a capitalist society must always, even if only 'in the last instance', reproduce the conditions for effective profit maximisation, maximisation being contingent upon a series of socially and culturally specific factors and phenomena, not least the balances of social forces.

Further, regulation is a complex and often contradictory process of mediation, one that struggles to negotiate a path between competing social forces and their demands, interests and aims – albeit these forces **are** hardly equivalents. Through regulation, the state can claim to act in the general interest whilst in fact favouring sectional interests – notably, those of business organisations. Thus, regulation is an "unequal structure of representation" (Mahon, 1979: 154), a complex and often contradictory system of rules that ultimately aims to maintain and stabilise the existing social order, and which requires intense state (often allied with corporate) activity to construct and maintain. Moreover, challenges to existent levels of regulation are at the same time challenges to state (and corporate) power, and so require social forces as bearers and agents of struggle and resistance. Thus, consistent with this analysis, some analysts have highlighted the centrality of 'pro-regulatory forces' in securing demands for tighter regulation, and in ensuring the effective enforcement of the law. Regulation, then, is a dialectical process, with the level of regulation at any given time an outcome of the struggle between 'pro' and 'anti' regulatory forces. This is the context in which we consider the UK state's attempts to

manage the pandemic through talk and silencing, not least around the level of harm – notably deaths – produced through the crisis. It is to such attempts that we now turn.

### **‘After’ Covid – the ‘English’ condition**

In June 2021, the new, incoming Health Secretary, Sajiv Javid, in what was described as a “bullish statement” and “a sharp break with the tone of his predecessor Matt Hancock”, declared that England must “learn to live” with Covid-19. In stating this, Javid committed the Government to the long-mooted date of 19th July, when all Covid restrictions would be lifted in an “irreversible” step. (Cameron-Chileshe and Parker, 2021) This statement was made against the backcloth of the highest number of recorded cases since the Delta surge in January 2021, and marked the beginning of a long term rhetorical and material initiative through which the UK Government<sup>1</sup> effectively declared the pandemic over, defining Covid 19 as just another respiratory virus that its population had to live with.

This, then, signaled the beginning of the end of all ‘restrictions’ - the rather curious term by which public health measures had come to be known, intimating a limit on peoples’ freedoms as opposed to the conditions which allowed all members of society to undertake basic social activities (Reicher, 2021) – in England and eventually the UK. Indeed, across the UK, save for some minimal requirements around mask-wearing in parts of the devolved nation, all remaining distancing, testing and protective requirements had been abandoned, all overseas travel restrictions were lifted, and mandatory self-isolation on testing positive for the virus was ended even as it was announced that access to free home-testing kits, hitherto touted by Government as vital to living with the virus, was ended, too on 31st March, 2022. Without any discussion by Sage, the Government’s committee of medical and scientific committee of advisors (Yates, 2022), the only protections against the virus were to be a dwindling vaccination programme which it was claimed had “fallen off a cliff” (Independent Sage, 2022) and what was misleadingly yet widely touted as ‘personal responsibility’. (Pagel, 2022) Such claims of course chime perfectly with neo-liberal claims about personal freedom, ‘deregulation’ and a minimal state, all of which we address further in this paper.

Yet within this context, there remained a significant number of deaths, not that one would notice from the mainstream media or the espoused concerns of politicians of all political stripes

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<sup>1</sup> While we refer interchangeably to the Johnson and UK Government as a political entity as well as to the UK as a geographical one, it should be noted that across the UK, health is a devolved matter, and so handled autonomously by the administrations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. That said, some powers crucial to responding to the health crisis, notably fiscal matters, are determined by the UK Government in London, thereby strictly limiting the room for manoeuvre of devolved administrations. Further, while it is slightly misleading to refer to UK responses to the health crises - these inevitably varied by jurisdiction – there were broad corollaries in the ways in which the four administrations acted, notwithstanding some notable points of divergence both in practice and in representation.

– as *The Guardian* headline which ran above the letter by Couch (2022) to which we referred in our Introduction, pointedly asked, “*Why are we pretending that Covid is over?*”. Indeed, at 31st March 2022, on official data, the seven-day rolling average for Covid deaths in the UK stood at 152.<sup>2</sup> In fact, this was not unusually high for 2022, three months into the calendar year. The only day in 2022 when the seven-day rolling average for Covid reported deaths had fallen below 100 a day was on 27th February when the figure stood at 92.43. For one month, from 11th January when the 7-day average was 238.86, until 10th February, when it was 204.57, there were *over 200 deaths a day, every day*, peaking at 272.57 deaths a day. By 31st March, over 16,000 Covid deaths had been recorded in the first three months of 2022, so that there had been 165,530 such deaths in the UK since its first recorded case of Covid-19 on 31st January 2020. (Wright, 2021) Moreover, at 31st March 2022, the UK still had one of the highest *per capita* death rates in the world, with the UK placed 30th out of 155 countries for Covid deaths worldwide per one million of the population.<sup>3</sup>

This bald data tells us nothing, of course, about those who had died and continued to die as a result of the virus – although Government ministers were keen to state that the virus did not discriminate. Yet even early on in the pandemic, and notwithstanding the state’s ‘talk’, it was clear that the virus had had very marked effects in terms of the distribution of death by class and ethnicity. As early as May 2020, the ONS confirmed that black Britons were “more than four times more likely to die from the disease than white people, with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis almost twice as likely to die compared to the white majority”. (Booth and Barr, 2020) Then, days later, further ONS data showed that those in “low paid, manual jobs” were “four times more likely to die from the virus than men in professional occupations, while women working as carers [were] twice as likely to die as those in professional and technical roles”. Security guards, health and care workers, construction workers, plant operatives, cleaners, taxi drivers, bus drivers, chefs and retail workers – those who were forced to work through ‘lockdown’ – were at far greater risk of dying. (Barr and Inman, 2020) For these groups, at least whilst at work, the pandemic was not marked by restrictions – that is, regulation ostensibly designed to protect workers’ health and safety was not strengthened. Quite the opposite in fact: enforcement of such law, in significant decline in the two decades prior to the pandemic, virtually ground to a halt during the course of it. (Tombs, 2022) This raises the question of how we understand the nature and role of regulation. In the context of the pandemic, state regulation *permitted* exposure of certain groups of workers as necessary for the maintenance of production and economic life. This reflects the claim of a particular neo-Marxist view of regulation - namely, that it is much less about controlling or mitigating certain harms, much more about social order maintenance (Whyte, 2014). Thus, “(r)egulation maintains the steady rate and function of the machinery of industry and commerce”. (Tombs

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<sup>2</sup> All data on UK deaths is taken from <https://ourworldindata.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/>

and Whyte, 2015: 155) In this context, it should be emphasised that these vulnerabilities to Covid of the least protected workers in fact reflected the hazards they faced at work “in normal life”, in that “these patterns broadly reflect the pre-Covid major differences in age-standardised death rates” (Spiegelhalter and Masters, 2021: 127). These were, in effect, routine deaths in far from routine times – albeit at significantly increased levels.<sup>4</sup>

How the government talked about the deaths **forms** the next part of this paper.

### **Talking about Death**

For nearly two years, the pandemic was marked by long term, feverish efforts on the part of the Johnson government to socially construct a definition of reality - a ‘truth’ – about Covid deaths. Utilising the work of Corrigan and Sayer (1985),<sup>5</sup> the strategy was based on ‘state talk’ - the mutually reinforcing claims, turns of phrase and resort to ‘evidence’ on the part of “specific sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state system” (Jessop, 2016: 247), the institutional ensemble through which state power is enacted. Our analysis of such talk is rooted in the idea that the exercise of state power in maintaining an inequitable, harm-inducing social order within capitalist societies is built on two axes of domination and subordination: the often-unfettered, brutal resort to violence by state agents and the remorseless attempt to construct a political and popular hegemony around how social issues are perceived, understood and responded to. As Stuart Hall and his colleagues recognized, this is a dialectical process: ‘[c]onsensus is not the opposite...it is the complementary force of domination’ (Hall et al, cited in Coleman et al, 2009: 14). In thinking about the state’s response to the virus, we are concerned with the second dimension in this dialectic: the struggle to build a consensus around Covid-19 through the state’s mobilization of ‘talk’ and ‘silence’ to construct, disseminate and reinforce its preconceived, cynical narrative around the virus, particularly in relation to the number of dead and who should be accountable for these deaths.

Politically and culturally, ‘state talk’ operates through a series of interlinked images and strategies which are overwhelmingly politically regressive. In their cultural history of the British state, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer noted that “‘the State’ never stops talking’”. (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 3) In making this important point, they recognised that state power in capitalist societies extended beyond its material role in confronting internal problem populations and external enemies, to the cultural and symbolic position occupied, and the interventions made, by the different institutions in civil society. Thus,

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<sup>4</sup> The virus discriminated along other fault lines of structural inequalities, not least ethnicity (Office for National Statistics, 2022) and deprivation. (Gregory, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> This section builds upon the work of an earlier article (XXX, 2021)

States if the pun be forgiven *state*; the arcane rituals of a court of law, the formulae of royal assent to an Act of Parliament, visits of school inspectors, are all statements. They define, in detail, acceptable forms and images of social activity and individual and collective identity; they regulate, in empirically specifiable ways, much – very much, by the twentieth century – of social life. Indeed, in this sense ‘the State’ never stops talking. (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 3, emphasis in the original)

Persistent and continuous ‘talking’ has been, and remains, central to the operationalization of state power - socially constructing, as it does, the discursive parameters through which social issues are defined, discussed, disseminated and responded to. This process is contradictory; state ‘truths’ are never automatically accepted as fact, rather, they are contested. However, it is clear that from the beginning of the pandemic, the Johnson government relentlessly mobilised different platforms to define and disseminate its social construction of Covid-19 reality, and what should be done about it.

Thus, between 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021, there were 233 UK Government press briefings, Prime Ministerial addresses to the nation, NHS data briefings and Covid-19 Task Force briefings. (Prime Minister’s Office, nd) The briefings were part of the Cabinet’s public relations strategy which was run like a ‘political campaign’ (Ashton with Morris, 2020: 168). The press briefings, and the other media and Parliamentary interventions made by Ministers, supported by their scientific advisors, legitimated the government’s position that they were dealing with an ‘unprecedented’ crisis, that they were following the science, and that they were rationally evaluating the evidence to proactively and positively respond to the pandemic. And while there were contradictions, challenges and points of contestation from the media personnel who participated in the briefings, ultimately the government’s control of both the message *and* the format meant that Ministers and their advisors operated as ‘primary definers’ which allowed them ‘to create *an effective ideological and control closure* around the issue’ (Hall et al, 2013: 77 and 80, emphasis in the original).

We have elsewhere discussed in some detail the themes which constituted State talk through these press briefings and other state-managed fora over the period of the first year of the virus, up until early 2021. (XXX, 2021) And while we do not intend to repeat that analysis here, several elements are worth briefly noting.

First, Government draped itself in militaristic metaphors. Press briefings, ministerial interviews and media coverage were repetitively littered with words and phrases such as ramping up, surging, enemy, flatten, fight, field-hospitals, front-line, war, battle, weapons, armoury, beat, defeat, conquer. In general, the Government’s claim to be fighting for Britain, as echoes of the

British spirit and exceptionalism (carrying with it a deep sense of hegemonic masculinity) were constant reference points. Further, the state represented itself as under attack and embattled, facing an ‘invisible enemy’ which was unforeseen, once in a lifetime, once in a century, extraordinary (Farris et al, 2021: 298) As the UK Government repeatedly emphasised that the virus was ‘unprecedented’ (XXX, 2020) and that it had done, and was doing, all that could reasonably be done to protect people’s lives, such claims withstood little critical scrutiny. Governments around the globe were all faced with the same virus – and, indeed, the UK was in the favourable position of not being one of the first countries to be affected in the world or even in Europe. This did not interrupt the ceaseless militaristic metaphors, while state talk about being on and in the ‘frontline’ was a distraction from state delay, incompetence, self-interest and indeed criminality (Farris et al, 2021: 297).

Second, the language of ‘lockdown’ was ubiquitous. At the same time it was misleading, obscuring significant structures of race, class, gender and able-bodiedness, at the very least. Generally,<sup>6</sup> ‘lockdown’ involved some businesses – most notably hospitality and leisure, and personal services – being closed by law, with workers and business owners receiving varying levels of Government subsidy, albeit millions were either entirely excluded from or inadequately supported by this. Meanwhile, Ministers trumpeted the ‘unprecedented’ levels of financial support for those workers who could not work – obscuring mass immiseration.

The idea of lockdown became powerful through media, popular and political discourse. But while the middle classes found ways to while away their days, many workers never stayed at home but carried on working as usual – albeit, as we have seen, with increased levels of exposure to a potentially deadly virus. Where work was deemed as ‘essential’, this had to continue – but subject to the various Covid-guidelines (which for the most part were neither enforced nor enforceable; Tombs, 2022). ‘Essential’ work included many of the most vulnerable, marginalized and lowest paid workers cited above as most likely to die, as well as others including health, social care, emergency services, nursery and some school teachers. All of these diffuse forms of essential work were central to keeping the economy operating. Lockdown was not an option **for these workers.**

Third, the briefings and other state talk during this early period of the pandemic, in particular, was deployed to support the “dominant government mantra” that “*We’re All in it Together*”? (Farris et al., 2021: 294) – a mantra given greater force when, within days of the first lockdown being announced, both the Prime Minister and the Health Minister tested positive for it. (Sky

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<sup>6</sup> Here we should note that the four nations took slightly different approaches to restricting economic and social life, while within nations there were a variety of tiering systems which entailed regionally-based patchworks of greater or lesser restrictions. That said, there were commonalities and continuities in terms of how ‘lockdown’ worked and how it was represented.

News, 2020) However, the emptiness of such rhetoric was very quickly exposed, and indeed the discriminatory aspects of the virus was soon revealed as one of its clearest and most devastating effects – as virus effects have ravaged paths through existing structures of vulnerability, these piled physical, economic and social disadvantage upon disadvantage. (Bambra et al, 2021) Just some of these can be very briefly noted here.

The social and economic effects were wide-ranging – and many will endure for years to come. Discussions of inequality generally tend to focus upon disadvantage – the plight of ‘the poor’ – but inequality always has a twin flip-side, which is the fate of ‘the rich’. And it is very clear that some people did very well out of the crisis – both in the UK (Elliott, 2021, Jolly, 2021) and globally. (Oxfam, 2022, Therborn, 2021) This is without accounting for the vast levels of corruption associated with Government financing during the pandemic – likely frauds include fraudulent accessing of COVID-19 Corporate Financing Facility loans, the furlough scheme, the establishment and operation of the Track and Trace initiative, as well as a wide variety of potential fraud associated with procurement including the use of fast-track, VIP and ‘high priority’ lanes. (See, for example, Transparency International, 2021)

Thus, economic inequalities increased significantly – as the *Financial Times* put it, the pandemic “has broadly separated us into the exposed poor and the shielded rich.” (cited in Lansley, 2022: 249) Indeed, along with the greatest absolute death toll in Europe, the UK also managed to experience, in the quarter from March-June 2020, the deepest recession of G7 nations, the deepest recession in the EU and the deepest recession in its history (Eaton, 2020; Strauss and Parker, 2020). Unemployment was concentrated in poorest areas; some “four million people lost income but were excluded from any of the government support schemes” (Lansley, 2022: 250); the hesitancy to access testing given the impossibility of surviving on £98 per week statutory sick pay further explained why the virus spread most virulently in poorest areas (XXX, 2021).

Meanwhile, spousal and child abuse, lack of access to home-schooling, soaring mental illness in the form of anxiety, depression, loneliness and bereavement, morbidities associated with alcohol intake and lack of exercise were all exacerbated during the pandemic. Tens of thousands of young people were lost to the school system – mostly those already vulnerable whose vulnerability has increased by not being in school; estimates of the numbers of what have become known as ‘ghost-children’ vary from 100,000 (Savage, 2021) to 135,000 (Griffiths and Das, 2021).

A final aspect of state talk to note was the UK Government’s claims of British exceptionalism, encapsulated in series of claims that its performance and ‘the UK’ was “World Beating”. This persisted throughout the first nine months of the pandemic only to reach a high-point in the vaccine jingoism that surrounded the administration of the first licensed vaccine being injected into an arm in the UK in the first week of December 2020. Indeed, a “vaccine triumphalism”



(Coburg, 2020) had been in crass evidence on the very day the vaccine received regulatory approval, when the then Education Minister Gavin Williamson claimed the fact that the UK was the first to approve a vaccine was because it had “much better” scientists than France, Belgium or the US, claiming “we’re a much better country than every single one of them” (cited in Halliday, 2020). Such crass nationalism entirely cohered with the centrality of the phrase “world beating” to virus-talk. It was a constant refrain throughout the pandemic, a mark of British exceptionalism (Whyte, 2020) and a heightened ‘common-sense’. (Coleman and Mullin-McCandlish, 2021) One commentator remarked upon the “striking” prevalence of this phrase which was

hardly ever used in the Westminster parliament before 2020. In all of 2019, it appeared 21 times. But since 1 July this year, it has been brandished 148 times ... It is also part of the Brexit narrative of a British greatness that has no need of European normality ... [I]n the perpetual game of Britain versus a Rest of the World XI, there is only ever going to be one winner. (O’Toole, 2020)

The idea of British exceptionalism, and its world beating progress in the face of the virus, was one of the discursive aspects of state talk which has persisted throughout the course of the pandemic in the UK.

These discursive turns characterised the first twelve months of the pandemic in the UK. At the same time, the government’s talk did not achieve hegemony. So while Ministers *appeared* to be a model of transparency and accountability through the sheer number of press briefings, television broadcasts and Parliamentary debates they engaged in discussed above, all of which were underpinned by the relentless, but, as it turned out, false claim that they were both successfully suppressing the virus and on the road to defeating it by ‘following the science’ (XXX, 2021), this claim was criticised from the beginning. In May 2020, the palliative care doctor Rachel Clarke, citing Sir David Spiegelhalter, pointed out that the government was using “number theatre” to manipulate the message rather than actually inform people’. For her,

The true metric of success in a pandemic is simple, the overall number of deaths prevented. The point of our response to coronavirus is not to flatten curves, ramp up headlines, protect the NHS or invent mathematically nonsensical equations: *it is the prevention of unnecessary dying* (Clarke, 2020: 11, emphasis added).

Those working with government Ministers were also critical. Sir Jeremy Farrar, who sat on the Sage Committee advising Ministers, **stated that within two months** of the first death there were serious doubts about the Government’s ‘lack of honesty with the public’. Ministers were

not following the science, even if they said they were ...The public should have been warned that cases would rise as restrictions eased. Instead, they were led to believe the epidemic was over (Farrar and Ahuji, 2022).

This pattern was established from the start of the pandemic when the government launched its Coronavirus Action Plan. Johnson argued at the time that the ‘vast majority’ of the public should be ‘going about our business as usual’. Another member of Sage, surprised by the announcement, ‘went back to the minutes to see if we had ever properly discussed that four-phase strategy. The answer was no. *The politicians came up with that strategy and our job was to make it work*’. A third member ‘felt the plan simply *codified a strategy that was already in train*’ (ibid: 97-8, emphases added).

Others on the inside highlighted the manipulation of the statistical data around the deaths. For one frontline doctor,

you can’t say if someone has died from Covid if the computer says no on the swab test, even if the imaging and the biochemistry and the clinical signs and the contact history and the progress of the disease say it was, beyond any reasonable doubt. *If you were the suspicions type, you’d say that someone, somewhere, wanted to play down the figures* (Farooki, 2022: 61, emphasis added).

Simeon Scott (2021) has also pointed to the negative impact of quantification, and the use of statistics, which have ‘become key components in the *spectacle* that dominates contemporary capitalist social relations’ (ibid: 49, emphasis in the original). As Scott notes, the pandemic data used by the government, and reproduced in the mass media, provide a compelling example of the reification of numbers which are “pounded into our heads on a daily basis. There is, by comparison, very little public discussion of the qualitative dimensions of the epidemic. How is a corona death defined? What pressures are doctors under when signing death certificates? [These are] questions that are rarely asked”. (ibid).

### **A New Phase**

After enduring the political embarrassment of having again to close down much of the economy in the wake of a failed attempt to preserve Christmas 2020<sup>7</sup> - the level of regulation is, as we have indicated, always a site of struggle, and there are conditions in which pro-regulatory forces can win concessions (Snider, 1991) - the Government committed itself firmly to a new politics of the pandemic. Thus, the first half of 2021 marked a clear turn to a new phase of (re)defining the virus – then underlined by the accession to Secretary of State for Health of Sajiv Javid in June 2021. From being the first country to administer a vaccine, the UK Government then claimed, repeatedly and variously albeit hardly accurately, to be the country administering

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<sup>7</sup> In England, lockdowns proceeded as follows, while there were variations in the other three jurisdictions in the UK: first national lockdown, March to June 2020; minimal lockdown restrictions, July to September 2020; reimposed restrictions, September to October 2020; second national lockdown, November 2020; introduction of an extensive tiered system, December 2020; third national lockdown, January to March 2021, release of all restrictions from March 2021- March 2022. (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2021)

the greatest numbers of vaccines - first, second and 'booster' shots - to the most people. This was accompanied – as the success of the vaccine rollout became self-evident – to be the first country in the world to lift all restrictions, a feat intimately tied to the oft-repeated claim that the UK was, as the freest economy, and also, by late 2021 and through early 2022, the 'fastest growing economy in the G7' – a statement which "at best tells only half the story, with the sharp rise only being possible because of the record 9.4% slump in the economy in 2020". (Whitfield, 2022)

These were the conditions under which the pandemic could be declared effectively over in England on 19 July 2021 - on which day there were 45,703 recorded cases of Covid and a 7-day average of 42 deaths. At that point the imposed fact that 'we' all now had to live with the virus was the high-point of a long-term process of responsabilisation - a shift from public to personal health protection - which had been set in train in the very earliest weeks of 2021. As we have argued previously, this marked a key shift in state talk, beginning in the last days of 2020 and intensifying in the early weeks of 2021, which consisted of a remorseless shift towards identifying and punishing those who were failing to comply with the lockdown rules, while individualizing responsibility, became central to every government pronouncement. The wider reasons as to *why* individuals did not comply were largely silenced. (XXX, 2021)

Meanwhile, the most nauseating irony was, at this point, yet to be revealed – that December 2021 had also been the high point of Covid law-breaking by elected Conservatives and their employees in Downing Street, across Whitehall and at Conservative central office, illegalities which came to be subsumed under the term 'partygate'. This was the shorthand for 26 potentially illegal gatherings – that is, contravening Covid-regulations - subsequently investigated by the Metropolitan Police which took place across 25 separate days on which, in total, according to our calculations, the UK Government recorded 8,659 deaths. (See Duncan et al., 2022)

As 2021 progressed, even as known cases were in the hundreds of thousands and deaths continued to proliferate – there were over 74,000 Covid-deaths in the UK in the calendar year 2021 – state talk noticeably dwindled. What had once been virtually daily press briefings became a rarity, their absence representing a key mechanism through which the passing of the virus was under-scored, wired into the popular consciousness, and with their passing so, too, was death and suffering hidden from view. The final press briefing was held on 21st February 2022, only the third of that calendar year. The period after 19th July, when all Covid-restrictions were lifted in England, had seen just six such briefings, roughly one a month; in the previous six months of 2021, there had been over 30 such briefings, while during the period March 2020 to January 2021 there, as we have noted above, seen over 200. (Prime Minister's Office, nd) In effect, the state fell silent over Covid or, as one newspaper Editorial put it, "With the end of mass free public testing, and Sage scientists no longer providing regular advice, ministers are adopting a "See no Covid, hear no Covid, speak no Covid" strategy". (The Guardian, 2022) In this clear aim, Johnson's Government embraced the build-up then execution

of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as the ideal distraction from Covid, alongside a series of other domestic challenges to its authority (Esler, 2022)

Thus by early 2022, the manipulative and deceitful torrent of Ministerial talk about Covid deaths over the preceding two years, became a trickle as official pronouncements were radically reduced to the point where the sound of silence became the government's dominant strategy. And while this strategy, as we will illustrate, has not achieved hegemony either in terms of constructing a dominant 'truth' about the nature, number and extent of Covid deaths, or suppressing debate about them, nonetheless the perfidious attempts by Ministers to silence the discussion was central to the government's wider message that the public now had to 'learn to live with Covid'. In practice, this meant constructing a collective mentality where living with over 200 deaths a day - more than 8 an hour – was acceptable and not newsworthy. The wider public were pushed towards a sanitised, ideological space where there was little or no discussion about the dead, who they were, how they lived, how they died and, crucially, *how many of their deaths were preventable?*

The virtual disappearance of political and media discussion about the deaths was highlighted by Professor Alan Walker in a letter to the *Guardian*. Writing on 5 April, following over 1000 deaths the previous week, Walker pointed to

the failure of most of broadcast and print media to report the continuing death toll from Covid. This plays into the hands of libertarians who care little about public health, still less about the hugely unequal distribution of those deaths, and fuels the myth that Covid is just another virus that we have to live with (Walker, 2022).

Furthermore, the government had started to dismantle the mechanisms for tracking infection rates. On the same day Walker's letter was published, when the total number of dead had reached 190,053, the government announced that Imperial College's React-1 study was to lose its funding. That day's figures were

the last that will be published by the study group, as the government has now axed funding for the project. Throughout the pandemic, it has played a key role in tracking the spread of Covid-19 infections in the community, alongside the ONS study, which will continue (Geddes, 2022).

Analysing this change of strategy - from ubiquitous talk to corrosive silence - around the deaths is the focus of the next part of this paper.

### **The Sound of Silence**

For some, regulation is best understood as a dialectical process, one that is shaped by the outcome of struggles. Thus, for Snider (1991), the key factor in identifying regulatory outcomes are the interests and strength of various forces within capital, the nature and strength of various 'pro-regulatory' groups, and the interests within and strength of local and national states. In order to secure less rather than more regulation in the context of Covid – so-called

'restrictions' on peoples' *and corporate* freedoms – states (alongside anti-regulatory forces such as business organisations and free market ideologies) deploy a range of tactics and strategies. Varieties of state talk form part of these, as we have discussed at length. Equally significant is the attempt to silence the voices and demands of pro-regulatory forces.

It is in this context that a number of concepts developed by Thomas Mathiesen (2004) to analyse the social construction and maintenance of silence around social issues can usefully be applied to Covid deaths. We do not intend to use these exhaustively but some present themselves clearly as highly appropriate lenses through which to critically examine the activities of Johnson's government, and allied forces, to explain how the management, discussion and understanding of, and policy response to, the pandemic developed from endless talk to ominous silence.

The first point to make is that the silencing of debate around *any* social issue, including Covid deaths, is that it is

structural; it is a part of our everyday life; it is unbounded and is therefore engraved upon us; it is noiseless and therefore passes by unnoticed; and it is dynamic in the sense that in our society it spreads and becomes continually more encompassing. The structural character of the silencing 'exempts' representatives of the state from responsibility for it, its everyday character makes it 'inescapable' from the point of view of those being silenced, its unbounded character makes it especially effective in relation to the individual, its noiseless character makes it easier to legitimize, and its dynamic character turns it into a mechanism of silencing which may be increasingly trusted (Mathiesen, 2004: 14).

Following this, Mathiesen discusses how silence around a social issue is maintained through the process of 'pulverisation' where the event is isolated so that 'pulverisation becomes a significant means of bringing people back into line, that is, of silencing them anew' (ibid: 37). How does pulverization and isolation operate in practice?

First, the event is individualized, it is constructed as exceptional, unusual, unexpected, 'unique and completely abnormal' (ibid: 39). This discourse was mobilized from the beginning of the pandemic by Ministers. In short, the pandemic could not have been predicted. In fact, the opposite was the case. It was predictable given that successive governments had conducted at least seven pandemic exercises before Covid appeared: 'the UK assessed the risk accurately and then ignored it' (Private Eye, No. 1559, 29 October-11 November 2021: 8).

Second, the event is normalized, it is 'made into something relatively common and expected within another frame of reference' (Mathiesen, 2005: 39). This strategy has become increasingly evident as the pandemic has progressed to the point where by April 2022, as we have noted, the mantra of 'living with Covid' had become the government's now normal response on the few occasions Ministers were quizzed, thereby avoiding any detailed discussion about the horrendous level of deaths that were still occurring.

Third, 'the event is split up' so that 'by being pulverised the context fades and recedes into the background in favour of ...unrelated questions of detail....' (ibid: 40). By April 2022, the broader picture about the number of dead and *how people had died* had been splintered and fragmented by Ministers into a discussion about expenditure on the NHS, the number of new nurses and doctors and the building of 40 new hospitals, although the government's elasticated definition of a new hospital included old hospitals which had simply been refurbished (Walker, 2021). These details, while important (although the figures, as ever, were exaggerated and massaged by the government) again shielded and mystified the number of deaths and the searing context in which they took place.

Fourth, an issue can be silenced through the manipulation of time: the event is 'relegated to an outdated past' (ibid: 42) - so the 'world beating' vaccination programme has made discussing the previous two years unfashionable and outdated and where any mistakes which were made are easy to see with hindsight; it is 'isolated in the present where emphasis is placed on the human or humanitarian aspects of the case' (ibid) – with Johnson this is represented in his visits to hospitals and to NHS sites for tracking and tracing; or the 'event is placed in the future' (ibid: 40) - in the case of the Covid dead, equivocation and vacillation have been underpinned by the government's endless contention that now was not the moment to devote time and resources to discussing this issue. Any discussion should be delayed to sometime in the future under the auspices of an official inquiry.

The final pulverising, isolating technique Mathiesen identifies is the elevation of the event in history - 'History with a capital H' (ibid 44) - meaning that it is situated within a 'much more general historical context....' (ibid: 43). In terms of Covid, pandemics have happened throughout history, the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 being a paradigmatic example. In fact, the UK government's initial response was to see the virus as a form of influenza which allowed Ministers to place it within a historical context that was both familiar and understandable. Two years on, that discourse remains part of official discourse: the human race has perennially been confronted with monumental natural dangers which are uncontrollable and unpredictable.

Mathiesen's critical, analytical framework helps in understanding the shift from egregious, government talk to conspicuous Ministerial silence. It is a strategy built on an ongoing, selective disengagement from the media which has included: Ministers refusing to appear on particular television and radio programmes (the allegedly liberal Channel Four News programme being a classic example) and the pooling of media interviews with Johnson, or a selected Minister, so that only one broadcast journalist has been allowed to ask questions before the dissemination of the interview to the remaining media outlets. Controlling the mainstream media message has been reinforced through the use of social media involving government by Twitter which has become a platform of choice for Ministers to respond to questions about Covid, and other social issues, while avoiding scrutiny of their tendentious and often false claims about the virus.

Finally, the abject acquiescence of the government's medical advisors, who stood passively with Johnson and his Ministers for two years at the press briefings, reinforced this silencing. It was not only their talk – the masses of questions they answered over two years, the profusion of graphs and data they produced and the endless statements they made - but it was their servile, lethal silence which also led the UK to a point where, as we have noted above, there were over 200 deaths a day in March/April 2022. On 19 April, the seven day total for the number of reported dead was 1483 (BBC Visual Data and Journalism Team, 2022). Two days later, on April 21, it was reported that 646 people - just under 27 an hour - had died over the previous 24 hours. Not one of the 11 major newspapers carried the story on their front pages. (BBC News, 2022a)

### **Silence and Memory**

In her book about the devastating ravages of the Spanish Flu Outbreak of 1918, which killed between 50 and 100 million people, Laura Spinney asks an important question: compared with the collective memory around wars, 'why does memory for a pandemic take time to develop?' (Spinney, 2017: 291). For her:

Perhaps one reason is that it's not so easy to count the dead. They don't wear uniforms, display exist wounds or fall down in a circumscribed arena. They die in large numbers in a short space of time, over a vast expanse of space, and many of them disappear into mass graves, not only before their disease has been diagnosed, but also before their lives have even been recorded (ibid).

One hundred years on, Spinney's question remains relevant to thinking about the Covid dead, nationally and internationally, and the ongoing attempts by the UK government to suppress the searing memory about what has happened since March 2020. Instead, from the perspective of Johnson and his Ministers, as a society we should be counting our collective blessings rather than counting the number of dead.

The proactive attempt to suppress remembering the Covid dead, is also the result of cynical, political choices and morally indefensible, expedient decision-making by politicians who, theoretically, are supposed to ensure the collective health and safety of those in the wider society. If the choices they make result in a catastrophic number of preventable deaths, then, for them, the logical path to follow is to quieten, subdue and silence discussion about the dead and cleanse the collective memory about the choices they made. And if there is little knowledge or discussion or publicity or memory about these choices through a form of Covid omerta being exercised - not only by those holding political power but also amongst their political opponents and the majority of those working in the mass media - then clearly this will lead to the debate about precisely who was responsible for the implementation or non-implementation of policies which led to these deaths being stifled and individual and collective memory being repressed.

In a material sense, memory is not a free-floating, decontextualized entity. It depends on knowledge, and its dissemination, which depends on who holds political power which, in turn, depends on the levels of cynical and brutal opportunism mobilised by those who exercise that power in order to retain it. By March/April 2022, the shredding of human life over the previous two years was secondary to the need to ensure the government's political survival through avoiding 'difficult' questions. Increasingly, and silently, the dead, and their full humanity, were absent. They were expendable ghosts who were subsumed and subjugated under the meaningless mantra of 'learning to live with Covid', a phrase designed not only to defuse any sense of outrage about the staggering, avoidable, human costs of these deaths but also had 'become a byword among government ministers for removing all Covid mitigations and returning to pre-pandemic practices' (Yates, 2022).

### **Contesting Silent Silencing**

Mathiesen concludes his thesis on 'silent silencing' by arguing that this very political process can result in 'acquiescence' so that 'given standpoints are accepted without protest' (Mathiesen, 2004: 9). And while, given the government's attempt to reconfigure individual and collective memory, and move the caravan of death on, there is the possibility that a collective Covid acquiescence and social and cultural ignorance could be developed around the Covid dead (Barton and Davies, 2019; McGoey, 2014), although for others, 'the sound of breaking hearts [was] deafening' (Farooki, 2022: 208).

Yet a dialectical understanding of what regulation is and how any level of regulation is achieved highlights the fact no such level is ever secure – it is always an object of struggle within which anti-regulation strategies are always subject to resistance. (Snider, 1991). Thus, as with its attempt to socially construct a consensus through its toxic strategy of talk, the government has not achieved hegemony with its strategy of silencing. Acquiescence and ignorance have not been forthcoming. Instead, there have been a range of interventions and challenges from different groups and organisations - from Independent Sage and media outlets like The Guardian and The Canary to grassroots organisations and radical academics and lawyers - which, taken together, have shown that '[Covid] hegemonies are never completed projects: they are always in contention. There are always cracks and contradictions - and therefore opportunities' (Hall et al., cited in Sim, 2014: 61).

By February 2021, the 'cracks and contradictions' in the government's strategy were becoming more acute as allegations around cronyism and corruption emerged. Of particular concern was the opaque process for awarding contracts to purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The Good Law Project (GLP) successfully sued the government over its failure to reveal details about the awarding of PPE contracts during the pandemic. The High Court ruled the "Secretary of State acted unlawfully by failing to comply with the Transparency Policy". In January 2023, the contract had still not been published which led the GLP to send 'a Pre-Action Protocol letter to the Government requiring that it fix its breach by publishing the contracts' (Good Law Project, 2023). GLP continue to use law to challenge Government procurement policies in a



host of areas – from PPE to public opinion research over Covid regulations - which often seem, at best, incompetent, at worst corrupt. (BBC News, 2022b)

As Foucault also recognized, knowledge about a social issue can never be entirely silenced. Writing in 1976, he argued that the critiques which had emerged of ‘institutions, practices and discourses’ over the previous ten to fifteen years had seen an ‘insurrection in subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault, 2004: 6 and 7). This insurrection took two forms. First, the ‘tools of scholarship’ could be used to reveal ‘blocks of historical knowledge’ which had been ‘masked’ and ‘buried’ (ibid: 7 and 8). Second, there were subjugated knowledges which had been ‘disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity’ (ibid: 7). In essence, these insurrections, have challenged dominant ‘truths’ and the ‘power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific’ (ibid: 9).

The activist interventions by *The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice Group* (following in the political footsteps of other family-led campaigns around Hillsborough, deaths in state custody and in the workplace), and supported by a number of radical lawyers, has become a focal point of resistance and contestation and provides a compelling, poignant example of Foucault’s point. The Group has refused to accept the government’s ‘truth’ and to be silenced about the deaths of their relatives. Rather, their individual and collective anger has highlighted the dread and degradation they suffered which has underpinned their determination to uncover what happened to their relatives and why. In doing so, they have refused to accept that their knowledge, and the traumatic, soul-crunching experience of bereavement, is ‘naïve’ or ‘hierarchically inferior’. Instead, the families have contested and denied the state’s ‘truth’ about the number of dead, how they died and why they died, a ‘truth’ legitimated by scientists, medical and otherwise, working with, and for, the state under the banner of the allegedly apolitical, rationality and neutrality of science. They are demanding ‘Facts, Truth and Justice’. As they note: ‘tens of thousands of people died who didn’t need to die. Help us make sure the statutory Inquiry into the Government’s handling of the Covid 19 pandemic holds them truly to account’.<sup>8</sup>

The families have refused to be either ‘defined in’ by the state into accepting the dominant narrative about the Covid deaths, nor have they allowed themselves to be ‘defined out’ as ideologues and extremists, two strategies which the state has pursued for decades whenever its power to define reality has been challenged (Mathiesen, 1980: 287-289).

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<sup>8</sup> This is taken from the website of the COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice. See [COVID Bereaved Families for Justice – COVID Bereaved Families for Justice \(covidfamiliesforjustice.org\)](https://covidfamiliesforjustice.org)

Crucially, the state has not been able to repress the haunting presence of the dead in their collective memory which has propelled the social and legal actions they have engaged in. For Avery Gordon, haunting is a key motor in such actions:

Haunting always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present and is for this reason quite frightening. But haunting, unlike trauma by contrast, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done.....haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and the rigging are exposed, when *the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings won't go away*....Haunting refers to this socio-political-psychological state when something else, or something different from before, feels like it must be done, and prompts a something-to-be-done (Gordon 2011: 2-3, emphasis added).

The haunting of the relatives was reflected in an interview with Amos Waldman, whose grandmother had died in a care home. For him, not only was the government's policy 'abhorrent' and immoral' but he also discussed the final 'haunting' telephone conversation he had with her just before she died (Sky News, 2022). In April 2022, in what was described as a 'landmark ruling', the High Court indicated that the government's policy towards care homes in the first stages of the pandemic was illegal (Booth, 2022). Charlie Williams, a spokesperson for Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK was clear about the implications of the judgement both legally and for him individually with respect to the activism of bereaved families and his refusal to accept the government's 'truth' or be acquiescent or silent:

My view is that this government is guilty of gross negligence and the manslaughter of my father. I've said that from day one and I'm still saying it today ... But I've always believed that the day will come – no matter how many PR stunts that this prime minister pulls out of the hat – when this government is finally forced to face up to what it did (Williams, 2022).

As Mr Williams suggests, the families' campaign, based on the argument that thousands of their relatives' deaths were preventable, raises the possibility that charges of Corporate Manslaughter could be brought against public authorities such as NHS Trusts and the Department of Health and Social Care (XXX, 2021). Related to this, the *British Medical Journal* has also raised the question of 'social murder' - forcing sections of the population to live in conditions which inevitably led to avoidable, premature deaths:

The "social murder" of populations is more than a relic of a bygone age. It is very real today, exposed and magnified by [C]ovid-19. It cannot be ignored or spun away. Politicians must be held to account by legal and electoral means, indeed by any national and international constitutional means necessary. State failures that led us to two

million deaths are “actions” and “inactions” that should shame us all (Abbasi, cited in *ibid*).

Space precludes a full discussion of the implications in applying this concept to Covid deaths. Nonetheless, even a brief consideration of its possible application raises profound questions about prevention, responsibility and accountability. In the case of the latter, intent enjoys significant legal status, elevated above negligence or carelessness. But this presupposes a moral hierarchy of seriousness which is open to challenge. Reiman (1998) for example, contrasts the motives - and associated moral culpability - of most acts recognised as intentional murder with what he calls the indirect harms on the part of absentee killers, by which he means deaths which result where employers refuse to invest in safe plant or working methods, thus comparably applicable to Covid public health measures and pre-pandemic planning. He further notes that intentional killings generally result from acts directed explicitly at one (or, rarely, more than one) specific individual. (*Ibid*, p. 67) Such intentional killings are contrasted with deaths that result from ‘indirect’ harms, so that the relative moral culpability of the intentional killer on the one hand and the mine executive who cuts safety corners - or politicians who ignore safety concerns around transferring patients with Covid into care homes - is quite distinct. Through his discussion, Reiman locates these different types of offenders on a moral hierarchy which arguably inverts, or at least collapses, the hierarchy of culpability around which criminal law operates. Reiman concludes that offenders of intentional, one-on-one harm are less likely to represent some *generalised* threat to others than the mine executive – and, logically, the politicians who ignore Covid public health guidelines. The reasoning is plausible, and points to the ‘indirect’ harms generated via indifference or negligence as at least as, if not more, culpable compared with intention and ‘direct’ harms. (Tombs, 2020)

In thinking about the devastating magnitude of Covid deaths in the UK, and the scale of excess deaths we are reminded of a point made by Steven Box some forty years ago: ‘[definitions] of serious crime are essentially ideological constructs. They do not refer to those behaviours which objectively and avoidably cause us the most harm, injury and suffering’ (Box, 1983: 13, emphasis in the original). For Box, then, there is ‘nothing but mystification’ with respect to the social construction of crime (*ibid*: 12). Following Box, the government’s abject machinations, and the overt and covert strategies of talk and silence employed by government ministers, shamefully supported by its Labour opposition and the majority of the mass media, have attempted to mystify the grim reality of these deaths and the immeasurable social harms they have generated for individuals, families and communities.

## **Conclusion**

The Nobel Laureate Samuel Beckett once correctly said that we should not ‘look for meaning in the words. Listen to the silences’ (cited in Sim, 2020). Beckett’s point is relevant to the discussion in this paper. Despite the millions of spoken and written words over the last two years, in April 2022, it is in the silences where the politics of Covid deaths is now being played out by a government intent on ‘moving on’.

At the same time, as this paper has illustrated, silence has not entirely prevailed. Nor has the attempt to declare the pandemic at an end in the UK been entirely successful, even if that might at times, and to some, appear to be the case – pro-regulatory forces continue to contest state (and, relatedly, corporate) versions of truth, as we have seen, so that the possibility of the re-regulation of aspects of economic and social life also remains. This opens up two other possibilities: that those responsible for the nearly 200,000 avoidable deaths in the UK – 33,000 alone<sup>9</sup>, nearly 4 people an hour - in 2022 when the pandemic was supposed to be ‘over’ - will be held to account for the actions they took, and did not take, before and during the pandemic and that the meaning of care should be critically redefined replacing it with an alternative, emancipatory praxis of care and compassion. As Elizabeth Povinelli has argued, within the politics of neoliberalism, the practice of care is subverted: ‘[In] neoliberalism to care for others is to refuse to preserve life if it lies outside of market value’ (cited in Stevenson, 2014: 211). Turning these possibilities into probabilities would provide a radical basis for actually moving forward to a future based on social justice while never forgetting the devastating social harms of the past which the hypocritical discourse of ‘moving on’ cruelly seeks to anesthetize us to.

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<sup>9</sup> Professor Christina Pagel Independent Sage broadcast on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2023. ([indie\\_SAGE\\_13.01.2023 - YouTube](#))

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