

Lockdown stories (un)told: challenging official narratives through working class solidarity.

The Working Class Collective (2022) *The Lockdown Diaries of the Working Class*. London: The Working Class Collective.

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Since the earliest ‘pillow books’ of the Heian Imperial Court (Bundy, 1991) diaries have offered a perspective on history that official records cannot. *The Lockdown Diaries of the Working Class* adds to our understanding of life in the United Kingdom during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The diaries illustrate the daily realities of the working class during this period and challenge the narrative set by those in power, wealth, and influence. Six chapters of collected diaries from twenty-seven contributors are interwoven with original images – some provided by the diarists themselves, others by artists inspired by the diarists.

The book claims working class solidarity as ‘both method and cause’ (p.34). The diaries are powerful and raw; they capture the stories of people most likely to be erased from historical accounts of this period. And, in amplifying their voices, the book addresses that critique of much mainstream academic work: that ‘participants are made to disappear’ and ‘treated as pieces of evidence rather than real people’ (p.31). To be sure, this is not a book that disappears – with an acid yellow hardback cover, it jumps out of you from the bookshelf.

In each of the six chapters, working class artists offer visual interpretations of the written lockdown diaries. Each engaging with daily realities of the working class but offering a different perspective to mainstream narratives.

Daisy, from Canvey Island, creates images that are lively and vibrant. Emma, a queer artist from Bradford, injects her work with dark humour whilst Sahra explores the stereotypes that she encountered as an “Essex girl” despite being originally from Somalia. Paul satirises the elitism, snobbery, and unfairness he observes around him in North London, whereas Colum pens evocative

artwork overflowing with grassroots organising potential. Lucy, from Warrington, depicts working-class people as they feel, rather than how they are commonly perceived. Of all the diarists, I will not forget the beautiful handwriting of Tisha, a recovering alcoholic.

The diaries depict colourful lives and embrace humour in the humdrum. Levi revels in his early-morning run through nearby farmland, Georgina plays Scrabble, whilst Jez reads Albert Camus. Kenny worries about eating too many biscuits, Gemma's cat is sick in her bra, and Shelley laughs about calling the police "fannies". These stories prompt me to reflect on my class privilege and direct my gaze towards the intersection of class with other markers of marginalisation. Sammi struggles with a schizophrenia diagnosis, Yvonne reports depression, Caleb is separated from his children. Yasmine, a single woman living alone, misses human contact until being unexpectedly touched in a supermarket. Tony feels that society doesn't care about 'people like him' – those with no fixed abode (p.168). Rendered visible in this book, are examples of how individuals own their working-class identities, rather than allow themselves to be defined by them.

In their introduction to this journal's special issue on the topic of Covid-19, Zanoni and Mir (2021) highlight three types of relations that came to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic: between capitalism/society, inequalities/policies, and women workers/expendable lives. The themes surface repeatedly in these working-class diaries.

Mark is a healthcare worker experiencing the brutal systemic priorities of capitalism which seek to make profit from the sale of personal protective equipment. This speaks to the realities of "Covid capitalism" (Dale and Bhattacharya, 2020) in which everything becomes commodified and essential work is left to the most precarious workers. Jaffe (2020: online) notes the "tendency to devalue this kind of work is affected by and, also, affects what we think of the people who do it". Like many of the diarists, Louise feels emotional about the weekly 'clap for carers' – in which people stood at their front doors, outside their windows, on balconies in high-rises, to clap and cheer for those working on the frontline – but found this a source of both hope and anger.

Sam is living in a shared house and is concerned about government policies exacerbating existing inequalities, especially regarding the crisis in care homes: 'I am so fucking disgusted with this government, it's beyond awful' (p.166). Bourgeron (2021) notes similarities between the policies of the right-wing politicians whose laissez-faire approach exclusively benefits 'disaster capitalists' (Loewenstein, 2015). Sadie is shocked when the UK Prime Minister falls ill with the virus, but Adah is already suffering from a debilitating illness and heartbroken by the number of working-class people dying from the virus. The growing power of elites to profit from extreme events remains a concern for Eloise who sees through her case work for a Scottish politician how the poorest are the most vulnerable.

The intersection of gender and class directs inquiry towards the taken-for-granted boundaries between work and the home, noting the precarious lives of women workers and the gendered nature of domestic labour. Collette's work supports vulnerable women whilst Mary, despite the support of the furlough scheme, struggles financially from collapsing freelance work. Melanie struggles without any outdoor space, Soraya home schools four children with voracious appetites and Maggie cares for her children and her parents. The diary entries describing the pressures of caring for people at work and at home further contextualise how bodies were unequally protected from Covid-19 (Alamgir et al., 2021) and many workers were considered disposable (Ulceluse and Bender, 2022).

The diaries contribute to streams of work concerned with the working class (Pitts, 2022) and working-class writers writing about the working class (Connolly, 2017). Critical scholars will be attuned to issues surrounding job insecurity reported by H (e.g., Selenko et al., 2017) and to worries about community cohesion hinted at by Sally when she discovers that she had been calling one of her neighbours by the wrong name for six years (e.g., Cowden and Singh, 2016). Kelly's writing about her wellbeing, and Gordon's fears about the creep of daytime drinking, prompts us to think about the links between social class and mental health (e.g., Day et al., 2020).

This book may disappoint theory vultures. Its approach tries to overcome the adage, that 'no editor can be trusted not to spoil a diary' (Ponsonby, 1923: 5) and refuses to get bogged down in literature or theory. It is committed storytelling of those who share working-class histories, values, and ways of

being. And therein lies the power of these unique accounts, and original artworks, to determine from a working-class perspective who the victims, heroes, and villains of “their” Covid-19 pandemic should be. Although I do not write from a working-class position, the experiences of diarists and artists reflect my own. I do not claim the same struggles but feel solidarity with those concerned for their physical and mental health, (dys)functional families and distant friendships, and access to/absence of security and support.

This book powerfully illuminates how people experience ‘lack’ – networks and knowhow, capital and confidence – which others them, and keeps them out. It has demanded I rethink how I confront otherness in my research, teaching, and praxis so that my histories, values, and ways of being better connect with what it is to be, amongst other things, ‘of working class’.

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