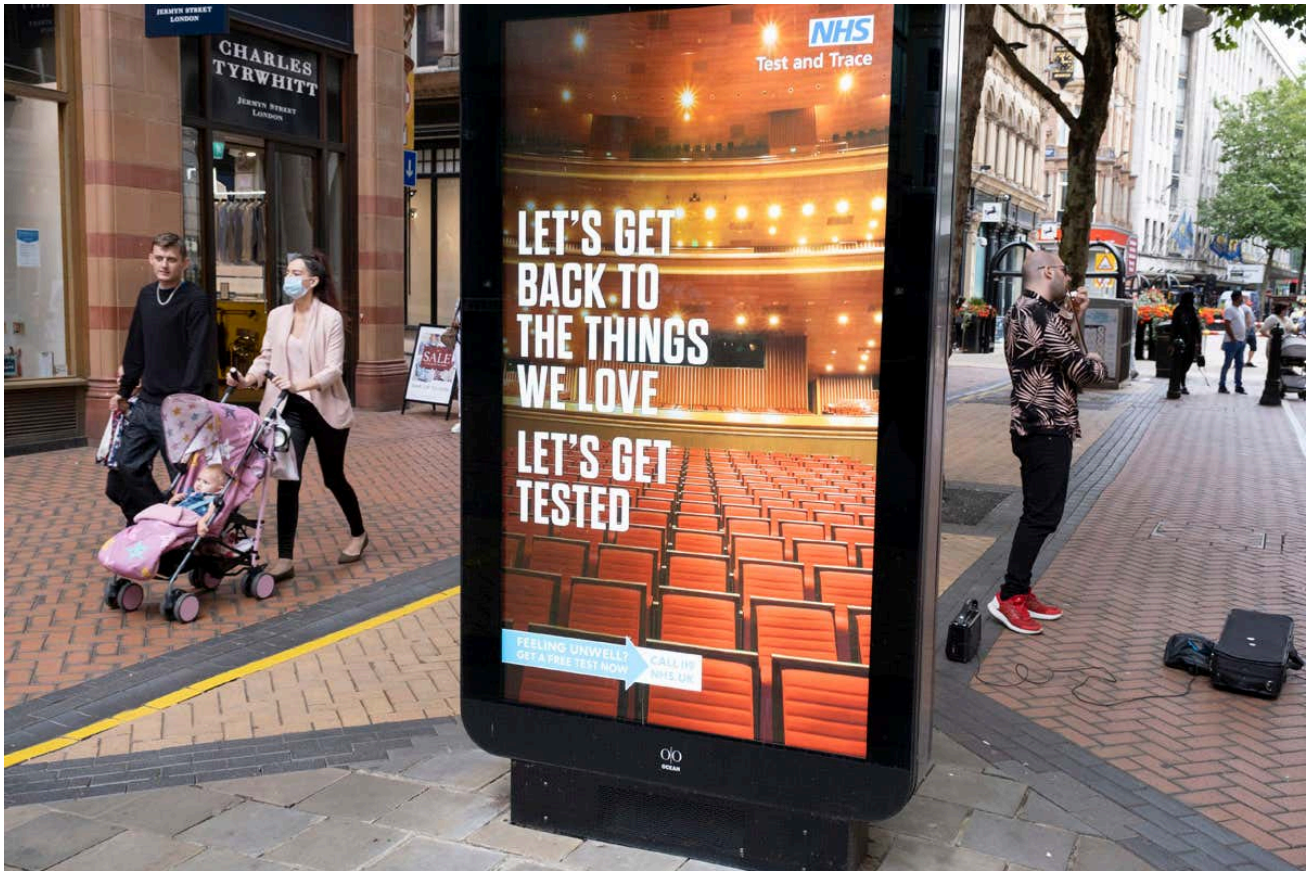


The sick patient of Europe

by Fergus Downie



Owing to the incompetence of our statisticians our death toll is now projected to decline but there is limited comfort to be drawn all the same. It is easy now to see that the dead ends of the counterculture were an ideal preparation for the hysteria unleashed by a phantom plague. As I write the whole western world is a sick patient and no nation offered up a more pitiful spectacle than Britain, which, forever groping for an insipid mission fastened on the sickly cult of the NHS and threw all dignity to the winds. This has not been a time for cool heads and there was something positively sinister about the gormless parades of happy clappers summoned by the state to issue orchestrated applause for their new idol. This was 'our NHS', a creepily democratic deity which functioned as a lowest common denominator morality for individuals who could summon no greater virtue than regimented laziness, and a

quisling-like propensity to inform on their neighbours (the liberal middle classes have been positively putrid in disgorging their well-mannered hatred of working class people they expect to empty their bins). Besides that terrible beauty, a retired judge and curmudgeonly journalists have cut lonely disillusioned figures, and we have only ourselves to blame. Conjuring conspiracies is unnecessary – millions welcomed their incarceration and it is a curious irony that those seeking a golden Victorian age of virtuous citizens were intent on sequestering the people most able and willing to carry the burden. The elderly were the most resistant to the sick role, they were transformed all the same into a 'marginalised community' and robbed of the self-respect that might have added years on their lives. Thus when we finally conduct a sober audit of this folly we will doubtless find it failed even on its own dismal logic, but leaving things there would be to miss the greater evil. Only the most servile neurasthenic instincts could have favoured even an efficient lockdown. There are some things worse than death and if a holocaust of misery would be good reason to weigh human dignity in the balance, our paltry harvest of excess deaths was never quite that. And what other indignities might await us?

Whether terrorists pose an existential threat to western societies is a question that never fails to excite journalists and there are always measured voices reassuring us that talk of dirty bombs is the product of fevered imaginations, and a license for base prejudices. Here the phrase 'existential' inevitably turns in on itself and begs the question. Even a fanatic would own total decimation is a tad ambitious but what if we are merely referring to the engineering of that dismal state when a paralysing fear crowds out all lofty sentiment and turns us into an enervated mob? That is a more plausible aim and it is not surprising ill lettered Islamists are fond of lingering on the prospect. After this conquest we have made of ourselves they need hardly tax themselves further. Living

with a virus is an easy thing, whether we are now able to live with ourselves is a more pressing question.