

Global crisis, Global questions, Global solutions?

“People have tried to make a distinction between a global crisis and a crisis of globalisation. It is undoubtedly a crisis of globalisation. Whether it’s the beginning of the end of the global supply chains, the global flows of capital, the global communications I doubt, but I think it’s going to force us to rethink what we mean by the management of the global economy. It’s going to force us to rethink what constitutes the right policies for a global society.” Gordon Brown; <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2020/04/gordon-brown-solution-crisis-still-global> *Instead of coronavirus,*

Summary of section:

This section moves beyond the UK to examine the world in Europe and beyond, starting with some comments on globalization and nationalisms, the “triple crisis” of capitalism, and the role of the press in fomenting memes. However, on this score, although we cannot certify that Britain definitely leads in the World Mediocrity Stakes, we can agree with David Spiegelhalter that we seem to be among the world leaders, with the additional comment that the ‘world leaders’ are also the most urban countries in the world. Rather than attempt such impossible statistical comparisons, the papers in this section are highly statistically relevant but are in the nature of case studies – taking one country, describing key features especially those which vary from Britain, and concluding where possible with an eye on the future.

Starting in Europe, we have articles on France, Georgia, Italy and Sweden. Outside Europe, there are linked articles on Cuba and the USA, Ghana, India and Paestine. This completes our *smorgasbord* of countries. By no means a random sample, but we hope you find at least some tasty titbits on the table.

News and Nationalisms

News discourses are fickle beasts, and the UK press can rarely consider seriously more than one major thing at a time. Since 2015 that “one thing” has been Brexit, with the war in Syria an occasional close second. But then on 31 January 2020, Brexit was “done”, and British headlines had to turn to something new. Since then, their focus has been: COVID-19, COVID-19, COVID-19 – with occasional pedantic diversions to explain how COVID-19 is really COVID-19 which is different from coronavirus which is different from SARS but might be almost the same as flu. 99% of the UK focus is upon COVID-19 in the UK; news from elsewhere rarely features unless necessary to put the UK situation in context – either to show how brilliantly we are doing (compared with Trump), or to show how dreadful we are (compared with e.g. Germany or South Korea).

The media’s geographical discourse has varied over time. First it was all “out there” – in a large city but in an obscure part of China that many people had never heard of. Problems in China reinforced a convenient meme of China’s authoritarian state clamping down on information and persecuting whistle-blowers. The martyred Li Wenliang became coronavirus’s first hero, something which all wars require.

And indeed, the language became more militaristic....

The press felt that what China was doing might be OK for autocracies, but could never be contemplated over here: force people to stay at home, build hospitals in a week, manage the media? *Never!!*²⁷

We hardly noticed reports from Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Maca, Singapore, Vietnam, Nepal, Malaysia, Sri Lanka (first cases on 13/16/20/21/22/22/23/23/24/25/27 January respectively). For most of us, all these places are far enough away not to worry. Unless we have family there. Or unless we know how quickly these things can travel. We were slightly more alarmed when the virus arrived in the USA and Canada (20 and 25 January), because these are homes of “kith and kin”, and we were pre-informed from Hurricane Katrina to know how lousy the US health system is and how racist the implications could be. We did not know how soon and how inevitably these pigeons would come to roost in the UK as well. (Wikipedia contributors (2020) “Timeline of the COVID-19 Pandemic in January 2020.” https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Timeline_of_the_COVID-19-19_pandemic_in_January_2020&oldid=955937447; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_2019%E2%80%9320_coronavirus_pandemic_from_November_2019_to_January_2020).

Alarm increased further when the virus arrived in France and Italy on 24 and 30 January. We have holiday properties out there; What will we do this summer? What about our wine supplies?!

Even when COVID-19 arrived in the UK on 31 January it was not headline news, and merely concerned a two recently-arrived Chinese people in a small northern town. They were swiftly removed to Middlesbrough and it was several weeks before any further cases were recorded in York.

Then cruise ships dominated the headlines. These “floating Petri dishes” became holidays from hell. But as soon as the Brits were safely home and the only people on board were third-world crew members, cruises disappeared from the news.

However, Lombardy was getting alarming. Their health service was overwhelmed; we began to realise the same thing could happen in the UK. Astute statisticians on the RadStats mailing list noted how the UK data was mimicking that from Italy, but with a 2-week timelag. Some lone voices worried about Africa and other third world areas – if first world Italy was overrun, what hope was there for the teeming millions? The plight of refugees in Greece was barely mentioned. The war in Syria was forgotten, as were WHO and international organisations.

Britain vs Rest of the World

International comparisons are inevitable, but what is the point?

Very often in the British press, the point has been to show how well we are doing compared with other countries – or how badly.

²⁷ Although of course the Nightingale Hospital in London – NHS’s largest hospital - was built under 2 weeks

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This is a mug's game at the best of times. But in a time of coronavirus all the problems are exaggerated: new concepts and language, flexible and continually changing definitions, questionable and complicated data sources. But the world is besotted with league tables.

And headlines always want to shriek out that Britain is the best in the world or that we are doing disastrously. The Brexit debate has left a legacy of angry tensions that have not assisted informed debate.

Yet the questions remain. Even within the UK, editors wish to tell us that Scotland is doing better than England, or vice versa, or that Wales is better than everyone. Cautious editors may remind us that population density is a key determining factor of COVID-19 breakout. Yet we have no means of standardizing for local neighbourhood population density (e.g. how many neighbours within 50 metres) as we do have for age-standardisation).

And Northern Ireland remains a part of the UK, even if epidemiologically it makes more sense to group it or compare it with the Irish Republic than with England, Scotland and Wales (Tomlinson, M. 2020).

Beyond the UK, it is perhaps surprising how coronavirus has so completely taken over the media that Brexit, the previous monopolising meme, is all but forgotten. For years we had no news but Brexit. Now there is nothing but COVID-19. Very few commentators have linked the two. Even now, as we lurch towards a coronavirus disaster, we forget that we are also lurching towards a no-deal Brexit disaster. Brexit, like the virus, will not wait.

Looking further afield, outside Europe, the British press remains silent unless it involves stranded Brits, cruise passengers, or English-speaking kith and kin. There is only so much empathy to go round, and most of it stays near home. So Radical Statistics may be forgiven if our reports here are brief and come from countries that rarely hit the news – Benin, Georgia, Cuba, Palestine. The selection is unashamedly opportunistic – we have picked low-hanging fruit. A more serious analysis would explore concepts of experimental design: What are the key statistical dimensions that separate countries? Can we get a representative sample? Or (maybe better) why not pick countries that lie at 'extreme values' on the key dimensions?

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Inasmuch as the press has made international comparisons, it has often been around the theme of “Which sort of lockdown is best?”, or “Should we have done more ‘test and trace’”? We may suspect that China, Korea and Singapore have actually done *better* at the informational and epidemiological cutting-edge than those that followed behind, despite the learning advantages that other countries have had. We had more time, and more information. Why have we done so badly? Is it another Asian miracle?

When we compare lockdown strategies, China and Sweden may be at the extremes. The one is massively centralized and authoritarian (we are led to believe), the other is relaxed and does everything by consensus. They certainly are different. What can we learn from these differences? There are questions here, and meta-questions, and meta-meta-questions. Discussion among Radical Statisticians could go some way towards resolving these issues. Or at least to elevate our confusion to a higher level.

So what we have here are a few non-representative thumb print case-studies. We see vast variations in health infrastructure and preparedness. The disadvantaged will doubtless be disadvantaged still further. There is always something new out of Africa. But a painless defeat of coronavirus is unlikely to be one of them. **But what if we *do* want to make international comparisons?**

When all the returns are in, will there be any coherent ‘league table of nations’ from which we can make inferences?

“Probably not” might be the answer.

However, we hazard that the following generalities may stand up to scrutiny:

1. MERS, SARS, AIDS and even Ebola may turn out to have been COVID-19-resistant blessings in disguise to the extent that countries experiencing these horrible crises establish sound protective structures: community testing, track-and-trace, cultural awareness etc., etc.. This could be a factor in countries as diverse as Korea, Vietnam and South Africa (but probably not Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone, all three scoring poorly on the World Bank’s Government Effectiveness index).
- 2 Countries which established lockdown *quickly* may turn out to have gained from this – China being the prime example. Others who dithered (UK, USA) may have done less well. (The advantage of being comfortably ‘behind the curve’ seems to have been squandered – we could have learned more from China *if we had been paying attention*. But government and media attention was focussed on Brexit.)
- 3 When total excess deaths are calculated, we may find very little difference. One informative outlier could be Sweden, whose ‘light touch’ lockdown will possibly increase early deaths, but deaths due to lockdown and second-wave deaths may be less. In addition, the economic damage of light lockdown is less than that from more severe action.

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Capitalism's 'Triple crisis'

But we must look beyond the crisis: Do we want a “return to normal”? What should a ‘new normal’ look like? And how do we get there?

Mariana Mazzucato speaks of capitalism's “triple crisis”: a pandemic-induced health crisis has ignited an economic crisis which is playing out against the backdrop of a global climate crisis. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/COVID-1919-crises-of-capitalism-new-state-role-by-mariana-mazzucato-2020-03>

Coronavirus is bringing hunger to many of the world's poorest. This is merely the worst of the world's current perfect storm of urgent crises.

Even in the USA, the richest country in the world, food queues spread bumper-to-bumper for many miles. In Britain, food banks have diminishing supply and increasing demand. In Africa and India, people literally starve to death. As COVID-19 slows in richer nations, it accelerates in poorer ones. Their experience, however, will be worse than ours. Their people have poorer health and their states have massively weaker health infrastructure and systems, including informational infrastructures: one Manhattan hospital contains more intensive care beds than many African nations. Furthermore, houses in developing countries are small and social distancing is more difficult, people are more reliant on now-toxic public transport, and fewer jobs can be done remotely.

Poor countries also lose out in the capitalist free-for-all that typifies the world market for strategic commodities – protective clothing, ventilators and drugs (never mind pervasive corruption in many poor countries, which only works against the poorest of the poor). Fanon's “damned of the earth” are doubly and triply damned.

Some respected oracles speak out about the need for international cooperation, but even sisterly organisations such as the European Union show how disorganised it can be in the face of rampant nationalism.

Nationalisms are strengthened by coronavirus. Borders close. Anti-alien legislation is enacted. The foreigner is feared. Discourses focus upon the here and now, our kith and kin. In Britain, surprisingly, even Brexit has been forgotten, although its toxic ideological legacy remains.

Here in this special edition of the Radical Statistics Journal we inherit and exhibit several of the weaknesses outlined above. Although our centre of gravity is UK-based, this section brings together an “opportunistic” sample of several “national reports” to illustrate the diversity and at the same time the similarities of all world systems. “The important thing about humanity is that we are all different, yet we are all the same.”

References

Tomlinson, M. (2020). “Coronavirus: Ireland Is One Island with Two Very Different Death Rates.” The Irish Times. The Irish Times. April 22, 2020. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/coronavirus-ireland-is-one-island-with-two-very-different-death-rates-1.4234353>

EUROPE: France and the UK