The 2020 Pandemic and Cities: London as a Case Study

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Abstract

This article analyses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020 on London's socio-economic structure. After outlining the history of health crises in London during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the city's demographic decline and resurgence, it describes the 2020 pandemic's impact on London's socio-economic inequalities and the role of home working. Context is provided by describing my own locality and experience while the wider context is discussed through comparison with other highly globalised cities such as Singapore. The article concludes by placing London's 2020 pandemic within a historical perspective as infections increase after the summer holidays and the beginning of the teaching term.

Keywords: London, pandemic, home working, inequality, globalisation

1. Disease and epidemics

London's fortunes have waxed and waned over the centuries. Established by the Romans during the first century C.E., it developed as a major trading and political centre and benefitted hugely from colonial expansion during the eighteenth century and the rapid industrialisation of the country in the nineteenth century. By 1900 London had become the world's largest with around 7,000,000 – a dramatic rise from the 1,000,000 inhabitants in 1800. It was now both an imperial and national capital – the centre of a global network of goods and capital, the seat of government, a predominantly commercial metropolis where industry was typically small scale. The inner areas of the city brought rich and poor together while the expanding middle class commuted by train from the spreading suburbs.

During the nineteenth century disease was a constant concern, particularly in the crowded poorer neighbourhoods. While typhoid, smallpox and yellow fever ravaged societies around the world, in London the major threat was cholera. Between 1832 and 1866 there were four outbreaks of cholera, which had spread from the Indian sub-continent, and ships arriving at the bustling docks of London's 'East End' were quarantined in an attempt to constrain the epidemic. Typhoid and smallpox were also serious threats with the death of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, from typhoid the most prominent victim.

Between the First and Second World War attempts to improve the health and sanitary conditions of the city's inner boroughs relied on slum clearance, the building of subsidised 'council housing', and the slow expansion of health and welfare services. The Second World War accelerated these developments. The national crisis led to strong government intervention and preparation for peace through state investment in health, housing and education. During the Labour government's period in office (1945-1951) not only was the National Health Service established but also secondary education extended, and a massive rebuilding programme implemented. For London not only was the policy of slum clearance and council accommodation expansion continued but also members of the skilled working class were encouraged to move to the new towns being built in a ring beyond the 'green belt' which was designed to preserve the countryside surrounding the metropolis.

A striking feature of London's development since the First World War has been the absence of major epidemics since the 'Spanish Flu' crisis of 1919. During a global pandemic where 30 to 40 million people died it is estimated that half of London's inhabitants were infected, while deaths attributed to the disease killed almost 230,000 across the country. The long-established practice of social distancing was impossible in the congested, poorer neighbourhoods and there was an absence of co-ordinated central and local government. The discovery of vaccines, the introduction of inoculations, improved sanitation and health care were major factors in preventing another flu epidemic. The last major health crisis before the 2020 pandemic was in December 1952 when over 6,000 inhabitants died during the 'smog' crisis caused by the combination of smoke and fog. The government was forced to introduce measures to limit pollution by banning the use of coal to heat properties. Progress was slow and another smog struck in

December 1962. Even though gas-powered central heating has become the norm and smog has disappeared, London suffers, like other cities around the world, from high rates of pollution linked mainly to increased car usage. A 2017 report on pollution in seventy-two European cities showed London as the twenty-fifth most polluted (Numbeo 2018).

2. Demographic decline and resurgence

These measures, combined with industrial decline and the gradual closure of the docks, resulted in the decline of London's population after the Second World War. Between 1951 and 1981 the number of inhabitants fell from 7,500,000 to 6,500,000 and the population only began to rise again during the late 1980s. London's inhabitants today are estimated to have reached 9,304,016 – the highest level in the city's long history.

This demographic resurgence was linked to the economic revitalisation of London as a global city. The finance and business sector, based in and around the City of London, built on international networks established through empire as the service sector rapidly expanded through the development of a lively cultural and food industry closely associated with tourism, the expansion of high tech firms as well as the traditional and new professions, e.g. medicine, law, accountancy, advertising, estate agency and education. London's resurgence was also fuelled by global migration and many migrants have been employed at the lower, more insecure levels of the city's economy.

A striking feature of the British government's response to this pandemic has been its failure to lock down early and introduce the practice of 'test and trace' in contrast to South Korea, Singapore and Germany. It seems as if the initial advice from the medical advisors relied on previous flu epidemics and did not consider the measures introduced by South Korea and Singapore relevant. The Conservative government was not eager to expand the state and wanted to focus on the withdrawal from the European Union ('Brexit') having won a resounding victory in the 2019 general election. Since the United Kingdom is four nations in one nation the central government's attempts to catch up with practices introduced elsewhere have been confined to England – the most populous nation – while the Scottish Nationalist (SNP) government has seized the opportunity to emphasise its separate political

strategy. Another referendum on Scottish independence now would probably result in a SNP victory, overturning the first one that saw a small majority voting to stay within the United Kingdom.

3. Urban inequalities and the pandemic

A number of commissioned reports have been produced since April 2020 which demonstrate the importance of locating the pandemic within the context of London's socio-economic structure, characterised by wide disparities in income and life chances. The pandemic has thrown a harsh light on these disparities and the impact on those living in deprived inner London neighbourhoods (many of these were the same locales that were heavily affected in previous epidemics).

Not surprisingly, those living in poorer, inner city neighbourhoods have been disproportionately affected by the current pandemic in contrast to the predominantly middle-class inhabitants of London's suburbs. One reason for this disparity appears to be the types of jobs pursued within the global city. Many in professional occupations have continued to be paid and able to stay out of harm's way through home working. Some have managed to escape the city altogether (a technique pursued by the wealthy since at least the seventeenth century) to second homes or rented accommodation. Poorer residents, on the other hand, have either lost their jobs or been obliged to drive buses and taxis, serve in supermarkets, work in hospitals and care homes, for example, with the attendant risks of exposure. (Some migrant workers also escaped London to their countries of origin, although the closedown of airports and flights from March until July limited this option). Public debate has also drawn attention to social and environmental factors – the risky nature of working in public arenas such as hospitals, schools, shops, restaurants and pubs, overcrowding especially in the case of large nuclear or multi-generational families, the availability of recreational space such as private gardens and public parks, as well as resistance to external regulation.

4. The growth of home working

Like other cities around the world, London's social and economic structure has developed through a sharp separation between public and private space. The expansion of a public transport system during the nineteenth century encouraged

the growth of suburbs occupied predominantly by middle class families whose routines were shaped by the daily commute 'into town'. This army of office workers were employed in the City of London and other parts of the city centre, such as the 'West End,' which provided entertainment and cultural stimulation through theatres, cinemas, concert halls, museums and restaurants, as well as an array of shops and small businesses. The expansion of tourism after the Second World War also encouraged the growth of the hotel and hospitality sector in the city centre. Between the city centre and the middle class suburbs there had emerged another key area – a ring of 'inner city' boroughs which are now inhabited by a mix of young middle class professionals and working class residents, many of whom came from migrant backgrounds and were employed in lower paid, manual work.

This separation between public and private space and the division between the city centre, suburbs and inner city was established during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as London thrived both as a national and imperial capital and a magnet for international trade. Economic and demographic decline after the Second World War was arrested by the rapid globalisation of the finance and business sector from the 1980s, the reinvention of London as a magnet for tourism, the cultural industry and high technology as well as by the arrival of migrants settling in the poorer, inner city boroughs.

5. Working from home

The rapid expansion of global communications through the use of the internet and mobile phones eroded this sharp separation between public and private space well before the current pandemic. Although businesses large and small insisted on staff coming into the office and massive office blocks continued to be erected across central London, those working in certain sectors such as high technology and university enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. University teaching staff at British and other western universities make limited use of their offices, usually occupying them on the specific days they come in to teach and attend meetings. The proliferation of online resources has made research from home more and more easy so university premises before the pandemic were used on a daily basis by administrative staff and resident students. Just as in other areas of the service sector university managers have long questioned the use of office space, since they see

lots of under-used offices. Many universities have reacted by obliging staff to move out of their individual offices into shared space and ensuring that staff establish regular times for meeting students on-site,

In London's city centre senior members of the highly globalised finance and business sector were already questioning the array of glossy, prestige buildings. When the lockdown was imposed at the end of March 2020 the city centre closed down with a massive impact not only on the office sector but also associated enterprises such as shops, pubs, theatres, cinemas and the transport system. Office workers were required to work from home and by early August the massive reduction in office workers on commercial enterprises in central London and other British urban centres was becoming acute, leading the government to encourage people to return. As the *Financial Times* noted in a September 1 article:

> Many urban workers are still wary about travelling on potentially crowded public transport and are also saving money by not commuting. The trend is most pronounced in big cities, with London still seeing barely a third of the footfall it had before the Covid-19 crisis began.
>
> (Financial Times 2020)

Public debate focussed on the risks involved in using public transport and ensuring safety in the workplace as the focus shifted to the opening of schools during early September. As restrictions eased during the summer the proportion of people commuting to work steadily rose. By mid-September the Office of National Statistics reported that the 'proportion of adults travelling to work rose above 60% for the first time according to the latest Opinions and Lifestyle Survey' (Office of National Statistics 2020). Those working at home in Britain had become a small minority, dropping steadily from a high of 38% in early June 2020 to 20% by September 13:

> The proportion working from home remained at 20% for the second consecutive week, with the proportion of working adults not working from home or travelling to work reducing from 23% to 18%, suggesting more people are returning to work (Office of National Statistics 2020).

The report did not produce a regional breakdown though and recent appeals by the Mayor of London to commuters to return to their central London offices indicated official concerns about the impact on the economic life of the City of London and the West End. On September 16, 2020, the Mayor announced that he had commissioned research "on London's Central Activities Zone, which includes the West End, along with the Isle of Dogs financial hub." (On London for the Good City 2020). This zone "generated a staggering £228 billion in economic output in 2017 – half of London's total and a tenth of all UK output within an area amounting to just 0.01% of the country – but they have been recovering more slowly than other places" (idem.).

However, the resurgence of infections during the summer holiday period led the government on September 22 to tighten restrictions again with a six-month restriction on night time socialising and support for home working. The sudden changes in tack by the government were roundly criticised by different interest groups but the government was clearly trying to prevent a second crippling lockdown as the winter flu season approached.

6. The pandemic and urban inequality

As the numbers of people infected by Covid-19 rapidly increased during March and April 2020 one of the key themes in public debate concerned the extent to which the pandemic had adversely affected London's inner-city boroughs, especially minority ethnic residents. A number of public reports and journal articles have been produced which provide insight into the connections between poverty, ethnicity, gender and racial discrimination. I will focus on three studies in particular – two are national surveys while the third concentrates on a particular inner London borough.

In August 2020 the Runnymede Trust published a report based on a survey undertaken during the previous month which concluded that:

> The impact of COVID-19 has been both uneven and widespread. Women have disproportionately borne the brunt of childcare and home-schooling while also balancing this with work. Over a third of people (36%) have experienced an increase in stress or anxiety during the coronavirus crisis, with one out of five struggling with social isolation.

And the detrimental experience of racism has continued to be a strong theme throughout this pandemic, with Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black African, Black Caribbean and Chinese groups reporting either an increase in racial attacks or abuse, or 'being treated unfairly because of their ethnicity', since the start of the coronavirus crisis.

(Haque, Becares and Treloar 2020:16)

Another national survey, undertaken by the Fawcett Society in collaboration with two London university departments and the Women's Budget Group highlighted the intersection of gender and ethnicity and concluded that:

Our research demonstrates specific disproportionalities to do with employment, anxiety, debt and childcare. These recommendations relate most closely to our findings but there are also issues identified by other organisations focusing on ethnicity and Covid-19, including: immigration and the impact of the Hostile Environment, especially on people who have 'No Recourse to Public Funds'; domestic abuse and the need for ringfenced funding for BAME led women's organisations; and criminal justice inequalities to do with the Coronavirus Act 2020.

(Fawcett Society 2020:13)

The third report was based on a highly deprived borough of Brent in north-west London and highlighted the connection between housing, poverty and ethnicity. Patrick Butler writing in The *Guardian* newspaper noted that "Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities – which make up the majority of the borough's population – were the worst hit by the pandemic" (Butler 2020) but the Brent Poverty Commission focused on "chronic overcrowding and widespread poverty" which had "created ideal conditions for the virus to thrive. [...] Latest figures show Brent has the worst death rate of any local authority in England and Wales per 100,000 population, with 490 deaths to the end of July, including thirty-six deaths alone in one of its most deprived neighbourhoods, Church End" (Butler 2020). The chair of the commission, Lord Best, said there was a clear link between coronavirus deaths and poverty, inequality and poor housing. "It's definitely the case that those people who have had Covid-19 and died of it come from the poorest areas, the most deprived estates and parts of the borough. That's just a fact" (Butler 2020).

Yet, the pandemic did not just impact severely on those coming from minority ethnic backgrounds – those working in cafes, restaurants, pubs and shops were also at high risk and this became obvious as the number of customers increased during the summer and safeguards declined, especially the use of masks and the observance of social distancing. In September 2020 Ian Sample writing in *The Guardian* reported on a study led by a member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which was playing a key role in government Covid-19 decision-making. The study revealed that women between the ages of twenty and forty were now:

> […] bearing the brunt of the UK's second wave of Covid-19 [...] Analysis of hospital records shows there has been a significant rise in the number of females aged 20 to 40 being admitted for serious Covid-19 infection since August. [...] SAGE suspects the rise is due to women in this age group being more likely to work in customer-facing jobs that make them vulnerable to contracting the disease (Sample 2020).

The problem was being compounded by weakening observance of social distancing rules which was putting young women at risk.

During the first wave of the pandemic in Britain, men were disproportionately struck down by coronavirus – a trend that has been seen worldwide.

> A number of socio-economic factors were at work in other words – ethnicity, gender, age, occupations and income – and the relationship between them fluctuated over time. Hence, ethnicity and male gender played key roles between March and early July but since then age and female gender had become more significant (Sample 2020).

7. Coping with the pandemic in my locality

To ground this general discussion, I will draw on my experience of my neighbourhood in south-west London. After arriving in London during 1973 to begin my academic career at Roehampton, I moved a number of times but remained within a three-mile radius of my work place. No commuting 'into town' for me! My current home is in Fulham, an area of south-west London which has changed considerably. Up to the 1970s it was a predominantly lower middle class

and skilled working class area but it has gradually become more wealthy with the arrival of middle class families and young, single professionals, many of whom come from France, Spain and Italy. The neighbourhood around me has become expensive so households often consist of two income earners employed, for example, in the finance and business sector, health and medicine, advertising, property or individual enterprise. However, further east lie social housing estates which are occupied by a high proportion of lower income, minority ethnic residents. A street market and ethnic food stores run between these estates while the expensive Waitrose supermarket at the end of the market is patronised by a largely middle class clientele.

This close proximity of rich and poor is typical of these inner areas of London, but they live in separate social and economic worlds. This separation was made only too clear when the pandemic struck. I was able to continue working from home and only went to two food stores where I felt relatively safe. A brief visit to the street market convinced me that restricting my range of shopping was a wise move since my local stores were able to control the flow of customers, many of whom were more observant of government advice concerning social distancing and the wearing of masks. The bustle of the street market had been an attraction before the lockdown but now appeared risky. Street markets across London have seen a massive drop in numbers and recently various public calls were made through social media to encourage people to return as restrictions were eased. The pandemic had exacerbated an already challenging situation for street markets and retail shopping more generally. As a 2017 report issued by the General London Assembly noted, street markets faced particular problems, i.e. the ageing profile of the market traders, the limited availability of training and support for newcomers, the increase in non-spending browsers and tourists and the low adoption of new technology (Greater London Authority 2017: 38-39).

As an academic I was used to working from home a lot. For the last ten years I have been able to focus on developing research networks and publications as well as continuing to supervise research students and look after visiting international scholars. I usually went twice a week to the office which I shared with a younger colleague and international visitors. Consequently, when the March 2020 national lockdown was introduced I was used to working at home and therefore did not have to change my routine very much. Home work was mingled with cycling

round the streets towards the River Thames, walking through the nearby park, playing badminton there and as restrictions eased during June 2020 meeting up with friends from my local choir. In July I was even able to fly abroad but during late August the number of infections rose once more and this time the central government imposed local lockdowns in England and then on September 22 reintroduced national restrictions while warning that more draconian measures would follow if the infection rate accelerated.

8. Wider developments

Clearly, the impact of the 2020 pandemic on cities around the world has not been uniform. There has been a complex and changing relationship between the disease and the political, social, cultural and economic structures of different nations. However, there is some evidence emerging about the pandemic's impact on urban inequalities and poor migrant workers in particular. For example, a recent report on Singapore, which appeared to have controlled the pandemic far more successfully than London and Britain more generally, exposed the little-known fate of migrant workers. Yvette Tan writing for the BBC on September 18, 2020, noted that while the rapid official response in early 2020 led Harvard epidemiologists to hail "Singapore's system the gold standard of near perfect detection", a largely unseen crisis was developing:

> Singapore is home to more than 300,000 low-wage foreign workers from countries like India and Bangladesh, who mainly work in industries like construction and manufacturing. [...] Their right to live in Singapore is tied to their job and their employer must provide accommodation, at a cost. They commute from their dorms in packed vans to building sites where they work and take breaks alongside men from other crowded dorms - perfect conditions for the virus to spread (Tan 2020).

The government responded by moving "[a]round 10,000 healthy migrant workers in essential services" to other accommodation – a skeleton staff to keep the country running and locking down the remaining migrant worker population by "sealing off the dormitories." Those who became sick "were gradually removed, isolated and treated" (Tan 2020).

Official reports have also provided evidence of the relationship between the pandemic and urban inequalities globally. The report by Laurence Guadagno for the International Organization for Migration focussed on migrants generally but referred specifically to global cities:

> Income inequality and marginalization affect local patterns of COVID-19 prevalence. While positive cases have been recorded throughout New York City, most confirmed cases were in areas with the lowest median incomes, despite the limited local availability of testing. This is likely due to structural factors linked to living and working conditions preventing people from applying basic prevention and mitigation measures. Migrants are over-represented in many of these neighbourhoods: all but two of the 20 areas with the most confirmed cases in New York host over 30 per cent of foreign-born residents (above the city-wide average of 24%), with the top two (ZIP codes 11368 and 11373) home respectively to 60 and 67 per cent (Guadagno 2020:5).

When the author moved on to discuss the difficulties in tracing migrants in Malaysia he again focussed on a rapidly globalising city – the national capital, Kuala Lumpur:

> A milestone for the spread of COVID-19 in the Kuala Lumpur area was a religious gathering between 27 February and 1 March where hundreds of people were infected. The event was attended by 14,000 people, including thousands of regular and irregular migrants from all over South-East Asia. Lack of knowledge on these communities and inability to effectively communicate with them slowed down the Government's contact tracing efforts. Lack of trust in a system that requires doctors to report undocumented patients, migrants hesitated to come forward despite repeated calls and even after the Government repelled [sic] relevant regulations (Guadagno 2020:6).

So, international labour migration is a common factor between London, Singapore and many other 'global cities' around the world and has played a major role in shaping the deep socio-economic inequalities exposed by the pandemic. Highly globalised cities have become dependent on migrant workers who undertake low paid,

risky jobs in the service sector, construction and manufacturing. They cannot afford to work at home and even if they did, their accommodation is generally cramped.

9. Putting the 2020 pandemic into perspective

Many social media accounts have been declaiming the demise of the city, especially highly globalised cities like London. However, the current pandemic must be set within an historical context which is why I began this article by outlining London's historical development and previous health crises. The rapid expansion of the city's population during the nineteenth century was accompanied by a number of epidemics (cholera, typhoid and smallpox) but the health of Londoners and the nation more generally improved considerably during the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. The only health crisis between the 1919 'Spanish flu' epidemic and the current Covid-19 pandemic was the 1952 winter 'smog'. This crisis carried off over 6,000 residents and by September 25, 2020 a similar number (6,197) had been recorded as dying from Covid-19 (Macrotrends 2020). Since London's population is much larger now than in 1952 – it rose from 8,328,000 in 1952 to the current estimate of 9,304,000 – the current pandemic has actually been less severe, although the number of deaths will obviously increase during the winter and until an effective vaccine is produced.

A historical lens also helps to remind us about the move from home-based jobs to employment outside the home or immediate locality. The rapid growth of manufacturing and commercial enterprise during the nineteenth century moved production away from the home. The army of commuters striding across London Bridge to the City of London from the train terminus and underground station became an abiding image of the city's commercial dependence on mobile labour. Home working was reduced to poor neighbourhoods of London's 'East End', for example, where families continued to rely on domestic production until the 1980s, particularly in the garment trade.

London's history also displays the sharp social and economic divisions among its inhabitants. Charles Booth's monumental survey of London – *Life and Labour in London, 1886-1903* – vividly mapped the city's disparities and many of today's localities have not changed radically. Despite the socio-economic changes I described in western and central Fulham, for example, the poor locality around the

street market were also extremely poor in Booth's time. The slums were replaced by far better council residential blocks but the gap between these council estates and the streets of terrace housing and private residential blocks was maintained, if not increased, by the arrival of middle class professionals and the subsequent upgrading of these properties.

Despite these similarities over time, the rapid globalisation of London's economy since the 1970s has made a significant difference and home working became more widespread as professional jobs expanded with the global flows of capital, information, images and ideas made possible by the internet and information technology. Although expensive offices have been built in the city centre to accommodate the army of commuters flooding in between Monday to Friday, the March to May 2020 lockdown showed how dispensable they are once the separation between work and home collapsed and middle class professionals were allowed to operate at home. Yet, working in public space continued for those who kept the city from grinding to a halt, especially those working in hospitals, transport, shops and delivery services. These could not shelter at home and were the most at risk.

As restrictions eased between June and mid-September 2020 Londoners and others across Britain sought to 'return to normal', which involved some going back to work or enjoying summer holidays before the beginning of the school term. Not surprisingly, infection rates began to increase once more and since health administration has been devolved across the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), officials have sought to react through local rather than UK-wide restrictions. The balance between working at home and in the office shifted once more with people being encouraged to stay home if they could.

As we have seen, teaching staff in the university sector have long been accustomed to working at home when their presence is not required on site. At the same time, with the beginning of the academic year university students were encouraged to take up full time residence on campus and again, unsurprisingly, this was followed by a number of student hall lockdowns across the UK as individuals became infected. The attempt to pursue 'blended teaching' where online courses were accompanied by small group sessions on campus with the teaching staff was difficult and raised lots of questions about 'value for money' in a higher educational system heavily dependent on student fees. Once again globalisation plays a major

role here since British universities have been very active recruiting students from outside Europe who pay much higher fees than home students, (the Chinese market has become particularly important here).

10. Concluding comment

As we have seen, the issues facing London are shared by other highly globalised cities around the world. National governments have reacted to the pandemic through similar lockdowns and cities have been the prime target of official action. Politicians and scientists have followed closely developments in Wuhan where the pandemic began and measures taken in other cities such as Seoul, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Auckland and Singapore. Cities will remain the prime focus of official action as governments seek to balance the need to revive their economies with keeping the pandemic under control as far as possible into 2021.

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