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The Vaccine Moment, part two

On Symbol and Story



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This is the second installment of what has now become a three-part series on the virus and the Machine. The third and final part will follow next week.

Tolstoy once claimed that there were only two stories in the world: 'a stranger arrives in town', and 'someone leaves on a journey.' A novelist, he thought, ought to be able to do almost anything with these at his disposal. A few years back, on a writing course I was

teaching, a student of mine pointed out that these could both be the same story told from different perspectives. I hadn't thought of that, but I've thought of it often since.

Tolstoy's was a life of seeking; a life of burning and journeying, of falling down and rising again and walking on towards truth. At each stage of the journey he picked up the stories he was telling and turned them around so that the light fell on them in new ways; examined them to see if they were true or not. *Call things by their name*, he advised himself in his diary in 1851. The advice holds.

Humans are storytellers; this might be the characteristic that distinguishes us most starkly from even our closest animal relatives. All day every day, we use narratives to try and make sense of the ongoing confusion of reality; of the business of being human. When Dougald Hine and I wrote the [Dark Mountain Manifesto](#) a dozen a years ago, it was stories we focused on. The claim we made then, which has been borne out since, is that our culture was telling the wrong story about the world, and it was leading us to the edge of a cliff:

This story has many variants, religious and secular, scientific, economic and mystic. But all tell of humanity's original transcendence of its animal beginnings, our growing mastery over a 'nature' to which we no longer belong, and the glorious future of plenty and prosperity which will follow when this mastery is complete. It is the story of human centrality, of a species destined to be lord of all it surveys, unconfined by the limits that apply to other, lesser creatures.

What makes this story so dangerous is that, for the most part, we have forgotten that it is a story.

Human history could be seen as a never-ending series of battles over stories, with the winners determining who shapes society, at least for a while. The ongoing 'culture war' in many Western nations is a classic example of this narrative struggle at work. Who gets to write the history of America, or Britain? Who decides if a statue stays up, or what it means? The battles around these stories are so ferocious precisely because they are seen by many people as existential. That statue, that history book, that museum display - for many people these are not just static objects or irrelevant bits of the cultural furniture:

they are symbols, the battle over which will determine who 'we' are, and what we teach our children.

Stories change their shape radically depending on the perspective they are told from. *The Odyssey* is a different story when Penelope tells it. New stories can replace old ones, and topple cultures in the process. Much of what I have been writing here since the spring has been about precisely this mechanism. What is going on in the post-post-modern West is that we are at the end of a story, and we are fighting violently over whether we can restore it - or if not, which story, or stories, will takes its place.

The historian Christopher Dawson described our region of the world, which has been so dominant for the last few centuries and is now fading in power and influence, as a Christian society overlaid on a barbarian substrate:

Western European culture is dominated by this sharp dualism between two cultures, two social traditions and two spiritual worlds - the war society of the barbarian kingdom with its cult of heroism and aggression and the peace society of the Christian Church with its ideals of asceticism and renunciation and its high theological culture ... I believe that it is to be regarded as the principal source of that dynamic element which is of such decisive significance for Western culture.

This mix of barbarian sinew and Christian faith, with an undergirding of classical thought, is what made the West. For a thousand years, medieval **Christendom** survived as a world entire in itself. Then, from the Reformation onwards, through the **Enlightenment**, **empire** and the rise of **science**, the Christian story was first challenged and then gradually superseded by another: the story of Progress. This story was the subject of our little manifesto twelve years ago:

Onto the root stock of Western Christianity, the Enlightenment at its most optimistic grafted a vision of an Earthly paradise, towards which human effort guided by calculative reason could take us. Following this guidance, each generation will live a better life than the life of those that went before it. History becomes an escalator, and the only way is up. On the top floor is human perfection. It is important that this should remain just out of reach in order to sustain the sensation of motion.

But the myth of Progress hit the buffers in the second half of the twentieth century. After Auschwitz, after Hiroshima, who could believe it? Those of us who are my age and older can still remember what the year 2000 was supposed to look like when we were children, with its jetpacks and flying cars and moon colonies and electricity too cheap to meter. Nobody mentioned the changing climate or the spiralling extinction rates or the bullshit jobs or the ocean gyres swimming in plastic or the billionaires in their bunkers or the children digging up **coltan** for the smartphones put together by other children in sweatshops we will never see.

The West was Christendom; but Christendom died. Then the West was Progress; but Progress died. From this vantage point - perhaps still too close to really make out the shape of things - I suspect that the last decade was the period during which this reality hit home for many people. The grand story we grew up with is now impossible even for many former true believers to cleave to. In response, we have entered a period we could call *narrative fracture*.

While once we might have been able to cleave to a grand narrative like the story of Progress, or smaller but nonetheless unifying stories, like those built around nation states, it is now almost impossible to do this at any scale. The narratives are too fractured. Everything moves too fast, and the centre will not hold. This is the meaning of the 'culture war': an ongoing battle over stories, with no sign at all of whether any new grand narrative will rise to replace that of Progress. Perhaps it won't. Perhaps the days of grand narratives are over. Either way, the battle over stories will not end any time soon.

Why am I writing about this in the second part of an essay on the covid virus? The answer, if it's not clear by now, is that the response to that virus has been filtered through precisely this process of narrative fracture. This in turn means that when people look at what is going on, they - we - filter what they see through entirely different stories.

I got a taste of this myself, as I knew I would, in response to my previous essay, which escaped the bounds of the little community I have cultivated here and roamed all over the Internet, with predictable results. It may turn out to be my most widely read essay ever - but what people thought they were reading was determined by the narratives they were already seeing the covid era through. Many people - too many to reply to - wrote to thank me for articulating what they were also feeling but felt afraid to say. Others took to

their social media accounts to denounce me as a conspiracy theorist and worse. Some people thought they were reading an 'anti-vaccine essay', despite the fact that I'd specifically said otherwise. Others thought that my opposition to the coercive measures being employed around the world right now meant I would be on board with this or that florid theory of their own making.

I am hardly the only one to have experienced this: it's a situation, as many have written to tell me, that is experienced daily across the world right now, in families, in workplaces, online. In particular, those who deviate from what I called the **Narrative** - the establishment story about covid and the response to it - can expect short shrift or worse. It is a difficult and frightening time for many even to venture out with questions which go against the grain of the official wisdom.

I wrote last time that this virus was apocalyptic, in the sense that it was revealing things previously hidden. One of these things has been the fractured nature of our stories; and that in turn has revealed just how fragile many of our societies are. The myth of Progress tells us we should have faith in certain things - accumulated scientific knowledge; accredited and 'educated' experts; journalists who investigate the facts of a story and then explain them to us; the human ability to establish truth - but the process of narrative fracture, which stems from a crisis of trust and legitimacy, means that not only do we not trust these things, but we can't even agree on what many of them mean. Filter that in turn through the hall of mirrors that is the Internet, and the stage is set for mass confusion, and a consequent deepening of hostility, mistrust and fear.

Over in his online forum **The Stoa**, philosopher Peter Limberg offers a Hegelian analysis of the two conflicting stories around covid, and how they run up against each other. He calls these two positions Thesis and Antithesis, and describes the first position — the Thesis — like this:

Lockdowns are needed to contain the virus, masks work and need to be mandated, vaccines are safe, people should take the vaccine to protect themselves and others, and vaccine passports will help open things up quicker and encourage those who are hesitant to get vaccinated.

The Thesis is the establishment position. It is held, in Limberg's words, by 'legacy media ... NGOs, Universities, Western governments, and **memetic tribes** on the political left.' In contrast, the opposing view — the Antithesis — is held by a ragtag of political dissidents of all stripes, from right wingers to anarchists, motivated to cluster for different reasons around an alternative story:

*Lockdowns are not needed, masks do not work, the safety and efficacy of the vaccines are being oversold, vaccine passports will not only fail but further segregate society, and in the near future we can expect **Giradian scapegoating** of the unvaccinated. In other words, we are positioned on the precipice of a slippery slope that leads towards increasingly draconian biopolitical control measures, the grip of which is unlikely to release even once the pandemic is over.*

We could see the last two years, slightly crudely, as a battle between these two stories. To some degree, your choice of which you adhere to will be dictated by your personal experience. If someone dear to you has died of covid, for example, it may make you more than impatient with people who question the efficacy of vaccines, or campaign against lockdowns. On the other hand, if (like me) you have been locked out of the life of much of your society for six months, for no reason which any science can justify and with no debate or consent, you are equally likely to snap at being told to 'follow the science', or trust the authorities to play nicely with your civil liberties. Both of these positions seem reasonable from their own perspective, but they are increasingly impossible to reconcile - and after two years of this, we are all just exhausted.

This is narrative fracture at work, and in the last month or so it feels like it has been happening faster: we have seen the outsider Antithesis apparently gaining ground and the establishment Thesis bleeding support. This is probably due both to the increasingly obvious shakiness of much of the Thesis - especially the failure of the vaccination programme to end the pandemic - and to the radically coercive measures being pursued by its advocates. Vaccine mandates, 'green passes', mass sackings, lockdowns of the 'unvaxxed', covid **detention camps**, and a sinister scapegoating campaign: all of these are entirely unprecedented, and are being pursued with little or no transparency, debate or consent. This seems to be sowing doubt in the minds of more and more people who were previously prepared to accept the Thesis.

As this process accelerates - as governments attempt increasingly desperately to vaccinate large numbers of unwilling people by force, even while they and their media allies struggle to suppress alternative narratives and awkward facts - more and more of those who have supported the Thesis may look at what is happening and start to feel uneasy. Note that this has nothing to do with anybody's 'vaccination status'. Whether or not someone is vaccinated is entirely a personal matter; it does not necessarily have any relationship to their view of the authoritarian measures currently being pursued in the name of public health. As those measures ramp up, **civil disobedience** is beginning to **spread**. If it spreads further - and if the measures fail or cannot be enforced - the Thesis story will begin to come apart. At that point, anything could happen.

This is the power of stories. A narrative about the world is always a tool - a rough map with which to navigate the complex territory of reality. But the map cannot be mistaken for the territory: if that happens you get stuck in your story, and the story - rather than the reality it points to - begins to dictate your actions.

In his 2020 book *The Plague Story*, the Australian writer Simon Sheridan suggests that the establishment response to what he calls the **coronapocalypse** can be seen as the playing out of an already-familiar story: the 'plague story' of the title. This, says Sheridan, is a story as old as plagues themselves, which is to say it is eternal. Tracing the structure of this story back through classic novels like Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* and Albert Camus's *The Plague*, as well as thorough contemporary Hollywood disaster flicks like *Outbreak* and *Contagion*, Sheridan suggests that the Plague Story is a pre-existing template, imprinted on our minds through our cultural inheritance, which has been applied inappropriately to the current pandemic.

Everybody knows the Plague Story in the West: we have all seen the films, or read the novels, about the terrifying new virus that escapes from a (usually foreign) lab and destroys much of humanity, until a few heroic outsiders manage to either defeat it with science or outlive it with luck and grit. Sheridan suggests that at the beginning of the pandemic, many governments tried to guide public discourse away from this apocalyptic narrative towards another story, which he calls 'the flu story' - that covid was a novel and potentially nasty flu-like illness, but one which could be overcome by pursuing 'herd immunity', reasonable health measures and individual good sense. But the attempt was doomed to fail, as pressure from a sensationalist media and a fearful public, egged on by

various statistical projections of looming disaster which turned out later to be wrong, pushed them towards the template of the Plague Story:

We started along the path into the plague story when the WHO's early warning system went off back in January [2020]. When western governments went into lockdown in March, we entered the plague story for real. At time of writing, we are still in the middle of the plague story and we don't know how to get out of it. How we eventually do get out of the story is anybody's guess at this point but until we do we are going to be in limbo. That's because societies run on stories. Not on facts. Not on 'science'. Not on risk analysis.

Note that the plague - or outbreak, or virus, or pandemic, or whatever word we choose - is distinct from the story we tell about it. Sheridan's point is that the covid pandemic has been viewed by most people, from the very early days, as a version of the Plague Story, and hence we must play that story out to its conclusion:

Once the plague story became the official interpretation of the corona event, people expected the elements of the story to be fulfilled. Quarantines needed to happen. People breaking the rules needed to be denounced. The experts needed to come to the rescue. All these things became necessary because they are implied by the structure of the story. It is for this reason that we must now have a vaccine because that is a very important part of the modern plague story Currently, we have a vaccine-shaped hole that must be filled.

Sheridan's Plague Story, like Limberg's Thesis/Antithesis split, is an attempt to explain how the pandemic is seen so differently by so many people, and how this in turn can lead to breakdowns in communication on the most intimate level. Sheridan puts into words an experience that most of us must have had at some point - or many points - in these last two years:

If, like me, you've had some very unusual conversations with people over the corona event, it's almost certainly because you disagree over the validity of the plague story. Arguing over details is not going to change minds at this point because what's up for grabs is not this or that opinion but an entire explanatory framework. For those of us that think this is an incorrect application of the plague story, the measures taken seem

radically and dangerously authoritarian. However, authoritarian actions are normal during a plague, and that is why people who are viewing events through that story don't have a problem with such actions.

Think of what the key symbols of these covid times mean from the perspective of these different stories, and the dangers of the moment become clear. *Masks*: abuse of state power, versus sign of social responsibility. *Vaccine passports*: the beginning of digital tyranny, versus a way to protect the vulnerable from the irresponsible. *Vaccine mandates*: the forced injection of an experimental drug into the bodies of the unwilling, versus a way to ensure public health in a time of unprecedented danger.

It is the last of these which may mark the point at which the authorities step over a line into uncharted territory. The symbolism of the 'vaccine mandate' - the violation of an unwilling body by a needle; the injection of unwanted drugs by forces of the state - this hits way deeper than any rational argument about 'R numbers' or ICU beds. For those who cleave to the Thesis or the Plague Story, vaccine mandates are a necessary, if maybe not ideal, next phase of the global response to covid. But for those of us who reject those stories, even partially, they are an outrageous violation. And if the mandates are extended to children, then for many people any remaining bond of trust between governed and governors may irretrievably break down. This is a very bad place for any society to find itself, and especially one which is already reeling from two years of enforced shutdowns and a pandemic which continues to roll on regardless.

Sheridan has the same fears:

If governments cannot bring the plague story that is the coronavirus to an end quickly, it is quite possible that the tensions themselves will lead to a further crisis especially once the real economic impacts of what has happened hit home. Governments will desperately want to bring the plague story to an end by way of a vaccine. But if that doesn't happen quickly then we will probably see an extended period of conflict between the technocracy and democracy.

Those words were written more than a year ago. Today we can see that, whatever the arguments for or against them, the vaccines have not ended the pandemic - and so the Plague Story continues to spool. Where does it go now? We don't know. It seems to me

that this is all part of the ongoing revelation. I don't think it is over yet. I fear, more and more, where it might lead us. I fear the rising anger, the mass hysteria, the pretend certainty on all sides. I fear the revelations to come, and I hope daily that my fears are groundless.

The early days of the pandemic, in many places, brought many people together around a shared threat. Whatever our perspectives, we shared the lockdowns, the uncertainty, the desire to see it end. We argued about what it was and what to do; back then, arguments were still possible, and could go uncensored. But the arrival of vaccine passports, mandates and segregation ripped society apart rather than bringing it together, dividing clean from unclean, responsible from irresponsible, foolish from wise, and creating a new class of acceptable scapegoats. The needle and the QR code have become the terrible signs of the times.

This is a perilous place to be, but I think that Sheridan is right: the conflict between democracy and technocracy which has been building for decades is looming clear before us now. This is my story: I have been telling it here for six months, and telling it in my writing for nearly three decades. It is cored around the kind of critique of technology that [Lewis Mumford](#), [Jacques Ellul](#), Ivan Illich, Neil Postman or Vandana Shiva have been advancing for decades, and which we dug deep into back in the 1990s when I worked at *The Ecologist* magazine. It is a claim - a fear - that a merger of state power, corporate power and galloping technological dominance and control are driving us into *Brave New World* or *Gattaca* with barely a murmur. It is the story of technocracy: the story of the Machine.

In 2021, this story has intertwined itself with the story of the virus and piggybacked upon it, using the pandemic to accelerate a pre-existing direction of travel. As we fight bitterly over the wedge issues of the age - vaccine safety, new variants, ivermectin, mandates - this meta-story continues to play itself out around and above us, its authors promising a software update that will reboot the Progress story for the Smart world to come, and save us all from illness and even death. I will write more about this next time, in the third and final part of this series.

If you haven't had enough yet, this recent interview I did with Freddie Sayers of Unherd digs further into these stories, and where they might be leading us. This and various other conversations can be seen on [my Youtube channel](#).



♡ 112 💬 102 ➦



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Janet Lees 12 hr ago

'Human history could be seen as a never-ending series of battles over stories, with the winners determining who shapes society, at least for a while.' Such beautifully expressed truth.

♡ 16 Reply



Nathan Klein Writes Nathan's Newsletter · 11 hr ago

I appreciate how you framed the pandemic as a battle over stories. I think warring over the narratives will tear our nations apart. I don't want to be pro or anti vaccine. Reading your essays has helped me determine to take a pacifistic approach. I want to hear both sides and reserve judgement until a later time when calmed tempers allow for more rational reflection.

The stance that allows me to remain sane is this: I don't know and I don't claim to know and I'm not going to fight.

Thanks again for bringing an alternative perspective to the chaos!

♡ 12 Reply

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