

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



GROWING UP IN LOCKDOWN

Jennie Bristow

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters On Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

academyofideas.org.uk/letters



Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:
free speech allowed.

academyofideas.org.uk

What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

GROWING UP IN LOCKDOWN

As we approach the first anniversary of lockdown, increasing attention has come to focus on the impact of this unprecedented social experiment on young people.

Children under the age of 18 make up around one fifth of the UK's populationⁱ - and, as we were continually reminded before 2020, they are our future. This is why society invests considerable emotional, educational and financial resources in the welfare and development of its young. We want them to develop into citizens capable of taking forward the values, responsibilities and achievements of our society and to provide and care for us when we can no longer do so for ourselves. Even if we didn't want our children to be happy, healthy, educated and integrated for their sake, we have a powerful social interest in wanting them to be so for our own sake. For this, we need them to grow up understanding and valuing the importance of freedom - especially after a period in which freedom has been in such short supply.

The neglect of young people during the Covid-19 crisis matters. 'Neglect' is not a term I use lightly, and it does not imply any lack of care on the part of individual parents, teachers, healthcare professionals,

or other adults within the community who remain dedicated to raising children and are struggling to do the best they can in difficult circumstances. Rather, I use the term to describe a political and institutional approach to the crisis, in which measures designed in the hope of containing this deadly new disease have had a disproportionately negative impact on younger generations.

On 16 January 2021, a coalition of child-health experts wrote to the *Guardian* warning that ‘children’s welfare has become a national emergency’. They argued that ‘growing numbers of hard-pressed families are being swept into poverty’, adding:

‘The closure of schools has widened the yawning education gap and the spiralling numbers of young people suffering mental illness and psychological distress look certain to increase with every day that lockdown keeps them isolated and uncertain about their futures.’ⁱⁱ

The pandemic represents a significant threat to human health and life, and when confronted with such a novel danger, governments should take measures to protect their populations. Public-health measures to contain infectious disease are, by necessity, unpleasant and authoritarian. From the Victorian slum clearances to the long-standing practice of quarantining the sick, history shows that there has never been a ‘nice’ way of

containing an epidemic. My criticism of the population-wide lockdowns instituted in the wake of Covid-19 is not that they disrupt children's lives, nor that they make them unhappy; pandemics themselves are disruptive and destructive, and cause widespread fear and misery.

Instead of encouraging young people to use their freedom wisely, to make informed decisions to help join in national efforts to combat the virus, we have stripped them of all agency.

When Covid-19 hit the UK, the choice was not just between 'normal life' and lockdown, but deciding *how* life would change to minimise the impact of infection on those most vulnerable to it, while minimising the damage wrought by public-health interventions themselves. The key word here is choice. Instead of figuring out ways to harness the strengths of living in a free society to combat this unpredictable virus, we became so focused on the need for new rules to restrict social life that we caused a number of *predictable* harms - in particular, to the relationship between adults and children. These are not limited to the damage done to education and welfare that are now, at least, being openly discussed. It goes deeper, violating age-old assumptions about the responsibility

adult society has to its young - and, in doing so, damaging our ability to respond effectively to this crisis.

The promotion of fear

One of the most striking features of global society's response to the pandemic is the apparent contradiction between the age and morbidity profile of Covid-19 as a disease (which can be fatal for the elderly and often leaves young people wondering whether they have a cold) and the blunt instrument of lockdown, which insists that everybody behave as though they are equally at risk of death.

In *The Corona Generation*,ⁱⁱⁱ a book written with my teenage daughter during Spring 2020, I looked at the paradoxical effects of a public-health campaign that presented young people as a particular danger to others precisely because they were less likely to suffer from the disease. The youthful, healthy body was pathologised as an unwitting vector of a granny-killing virus.

This narrative helped to drive the political, cultural, and institutional response from the start - and has now become ingrained. The depiction of young

people as ‘super-spreaders’ - troublesome, thoughtless germs on legs - has marshalled a climate of fear and suspicion about them, in place of a calm discussion with them. Instead of encouraging young people to use their freedom wisely, to make informed decisions to help join in national efforts to combat the virus and protect their elders, we have stripped them of all agency.

It didn't need to be like that. Before the first UK lockdown was introduced, I argued strongly^{iv} that young people should be mobilised around proactive measures to protect those at most risk. Far from encouraging young people to think that this crisis had nothing to do with them, I felt that this moment provided an opportunity to encourage teenagers and young adults to rise to the occasion and overcome some of the existential uncertainty and lack of direction that has characterised growing up in the twenty-first century. By shouldering responsibility for keeping the economy going, and playing a greater role in the local community, the young could contain some of the worst effects of this age-segregated disease and develop a sense of autonomy, commitment and solidarity.

The population-wide lockdowns and restrictions that happened instead have quashed this opportunity, with devastating consequences for old and young alike.

Under the guise that we are ‘all in it together’, these measures have glossed over the significant demographic features of the disease and hobbled attempts to protect those most at risk. Politicians and their advisers have become so focused on finding creative new ways of regulating the behaviour of the entire public, and so nervous of applying different measures to particular demographic groups, that they have ended up with the worst of all possible worlds - an approach that fails to discriminate to protect the elderly and discriminates against the young.

The failure to discriminate

Discrimination has two meanings: ‘the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, sex, or disability’ and ‘recognition and understanding of the difference between one thing and another’. With regard to the latter definition, since Covid-19 first came on the scene, we have known that its age profile is distinct from influenza pandemics, where the danger can be more demographically dispersed. As Mark Honigsbaum noted in *The Lancet* back in May^v, the 1968 influenza pandemic known as ‘Hong Kong Flu’ killed more than 30,000 in the UK and 100,000 people

in the USA, ‘with half the deaths among individuals younger than 65 years’.

Socially, one of the most fascinating differences between the response to Hong Kong Flu and the response to Covid-19 is the relative absence of preventive measures taken in 1968. ‘[W]hile at the height of the outbreak in December, 1968, the *New York Times* described the pandemic as “one of the worst in the nation's history”, there were few school closures and businesses, for the most, continued to operate as normal’, writes Honigsbaum.

In medical terms, there is also a crucial lesson here. Covid-19 is not like the flu. Yet those who try to draw out a key feature of this distinction, in terms of its disproportionate effect on the elderly, and propose protective measures that discriminate between age groups to avoid causing disproportionate harm to the young, are accused of downplaying the dangers of the disease and valuing some lives less than others.

This is inhumane nonsense. Not least, it allows policy-makers to evade responsibility for a whole range of failures around care of the elderly, from the long-standing crisis in social care to the limitations of NHS capacity. For example, it has long been understood that the rising numbers of very old people (aged 90 and over)^{vi} in the UK would result in extra demand

for health and social care. Yet until Covid-19 came along, it was simply assumed that the elderly and vulnerable would die anyway - indeed, as the callous term ‘bed blockers’^{vii} implied, policy-makers routinely spoke of the elderly as an unsustainable burden on health and social care systems.

In pathologising the desire for interactions free from restrictions as irresponsible or deadly, we’re encouraging young people to view freedom as inherently dangerous and morally suspect.

Now, the plight of the very old is being shamelessly manipulated to regulate the behaviour of an entire population. Rather than treating the virus as a public-health problem, with interventions designed to protect the vulnerable from its worst ravages, politicians have treated it as a morality play in which arbitrary lines between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviours are drawn.

The careless disregard for the elderly that has characterised policy-making pre-Covid-19 makes the propagandistic use of the daily death statistics even more irresponsible. Terrorising an otherwise-healthy octogenarian into believing that tea with her healthy toddler grandson is tantamount to signing her own death warrant is as reprehensibly inaccurate as

instructing healthy teenagers not to ‘kill granny’ by popping round for a visit. The consequences for relations between the generations go way beyond infection control. Encouraging young people to think that their moral duty is to avoid the elderly, rather than interact with them, actively encourages a sentiment of generational division and distancing. In the immediacy of a pandemic, most of us accept that aspects of normal life must change. But in pathologising the desire for interactions free from restrictions as irresponsible or deadly, we’re encouraging young people to view freedom as inherently dangerous and morally suspect.

Adult authority and responsibility

At a societal level, the problem of generational distancing is most clearly revealed by the prolonged closure of schools. This stands as a striking indictment of the weak attachment our current society has to the importance of educating its young. Most concerns about the impact of school closures have focused on the considerable welfare implications for children from deprived or abusive backgrounds; there remains an assumption that education itself could be ‘kept going’ online, as though schools do nothing more than set individual homework, and the role of teachers

can be reduced to disembodied instruction-and-feedback facilitators. This dismisses the role that schools play both in educating young people and socialising them into the world beyond the home.

Education, as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt argued in the 1950s, is the means through which our society ensures its survival. It is ‘the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable.’^{viii} It is also a demonstration of our commitment to the younger generation, and the means through which we prepare them to meet the future:

‘Education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.’^{ix}

In times of crisis, it is more important than ever to take responsibility for our world, and for the children who will make that world, by bringing them in. Yet our response to Covid-19 has been to slam the gates to the educational community closed and expel young

people from social life. The process of going to school and, crucially, leaving the parental home, teaches young people how to navigate their own sense of freedom in relation to the world. Suggestions that changes made throughout the pandemic might continue into the ‘new normal’, with Zoom classes and remote learning, underestimate how important it is for young people to have a space in which they can be with each other - and with adults other than their parents.

The distinction between adults and children has blurred as the distinction between school and home has disappeared.

Deprived of the all-important interaction with adults outside the home, young people had to rely solely on their parents for guidance. Yet parents’ authority has been compromised alongside teenagers’ burgeoning independence. The measures brought in to contain the spread of Covid-19 have infantilised the public, with lockdown sending British citizens to their rooms, only allowed out on condition of specific good behaviour (shopping, exercise, walking their dogs and - in exceptional circumstances - going to work). In other countries, curfews have operated as an official bedtime.

‘Stay Home’ orders operate in a destructive relationship with parental authority. Parents are responsible for ensuring compliance with these measures even where they contradict instinctive worries about the negative impact on their children’s physical and mental health, education, and relationships. Parents trying to assert their own authority against the excesses of ‘the rules’ have to draw their children into a contestation with official public-health advice, contributing to the corrosion of political trust and social solidarity. Meanwhile, teenagers on the cusp of independence cannot push against the authority of their parents in the small ways that they have always done without risking the wrath of the state. By taking a blanket approach to quashing freedom, we have hollowed out what liberty means, and how it links to a sense of responsibility. Teenagers going to raves during the pandemic have rightly been castigated as irresponsible, but it’s hard to expect much sense of responsibility from young people when they have been stripped of trust, duty and privacy.

As interactions with peers and school have been reduced to anything they could do online, young people have had to conduct their intimate conversations in the knowledge that they could be monitored or overheard. Conflicts between parents, online meetings with work colleagues and the sensitive discussions that might normally be had ‘not in front of

the children' have had to play out in the theatre of the entire household. The distinction between adults and children has blurred as the distinction between school and home has disappeared. For young people on the road to adulthood, this is disorienting and demoralising - what does it mean to grow up, when everybody is effectively a child? How can adults be trusted to give guidance, when they have so little control over their own lives?

This matters, too, from the standpoint of a society that needs and expects young people to play a role in dealing with the ongoing crisis of the pandemic. Having expelled them from our world and blamed them for our problems, re-integrating them into the project of rebuilding society will be no mean feat.

The dangers of safetyism

The question of how a society should respond to a pandemic, particularly of a new, highly-infectious and little-understood disease, is a difficult one for which there is unlikely to be one 'right' answer. The insistence that 'lockdowns work', even in the face of continued rises in infection and death, is as unconvincing as the insistence that they don't. The questions we should be asking about prolonged

lockdowns are therefore not whether they work or not, but about the extent to which they are the only thing to do. Are there other options? What dangers are we prepared to accept? And what known harms are we prepared to trade in order to mitigate the risks of a novel threat?

Some astute commentators have noted that the imperative at play here is that of ‘safetyism’^x - an orientation analysed by Frank Furedi in his 2018 book *How Fear Works: culture of fear in the 21st century*.^{xi} Furedi diagnoses the problem here as a ‘motivational crisis that stems from the feeble status of moral authority’ - in the absence of positive ideals, such as courage, duty and solidarity, modern societies have come to rely on a negative conception of authority, promoted via the elevation of safety to a foundational value. The demand for protection of an expanding range of potential harms is coming to trump all other values - particularly a defence of liberty - that democratic societies traditionally held dear, from freedom and experimentation to responsibility and intimacy.

The response to the pandemic has shown just how selective and damaging the pursuit of safetyism is. By failing to discriminate between the needs of different sections of the population, we have weakened the distinction between adults and children, dumping our responsibility towards the young as though it is a mere

inconvenience. These trends won't disappear once restrictions lift or even when Covid-19 is a bad memory - until we rediscover what it really means to be a free adult citizen, the kids will be lost in limbo.

References

- i 'Ethnicity facts and figures', Gov.uk, 22 August 2018
- ii Feuchtwang, Anna et al, 'Letters: our children are in crisis and need help', *Guardian*, 16 January 2021
- iii Bristow, Jennie and Gilland, Emma, *The Corona Generation: coming of age in a crisis*, John Hunt Publishing, 2020
- iv Bristow, Jennie, 'Covid-19 is not a "generation war"' *spiked*, 24 March 2020
- v Honigsbaum, Mark, 'Revisiting the 1957 and 1968 influenza pandemics', *The Lancet*, 25 May 2020
- vi 'Estimates of the very old, including centenarians, UK: 2002 to 2019', Office for National Statistics, 24 September 2020
- vii 'Bed blocking - what is it, and is it paralysing the NHS?', Full Fact, 24 July 2013
- viii Arendt, Hannah, 'The Crisis in Education', *Between Past and Future: eight exercises in political thought*, Penguin, 2006, p19
- ix Ibid, p19
- x Crawford, Matthew, 'The danger of safetyism', *UnHerd*, 15 May 2020
- xi Furedi, Frank, *How Fear Works: culture of fear in the 21st century*, Bloomsbury, 2018

Author

Jennie Bristow is a senior lecturer in sociology at Canterbury Christ Church University and an associate of the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies. Her recent books include: *The Corona Generation: coming of age in a crisis* (written with her daughter Emma Gilland), *Stop Mugging Grandma* and *The Sociology of Generations*. She is co-author of *Generational Encounters with Higher Education* with Sarah Cant and Anwesa Chatterjee.



Illustrations

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at janbow.com

Letters on Liberty identity

Alex Dale

Pamphlet and website design

Martyn Perks

— LETTERS on LIBERTY

academyofideas.org.uk/letters

