

## ***A rich inner life might be only upside of this invincible pandemic***

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One of the features of authoritarian and especially fascist politics is its desire to bring about a "New Man": a transformed superhuman who embodies the ideals of the political ideology in question.

Mussolini's version of this was based on a particular view of the ancient Roman soldier, and held that a man should be virile, unromantic, strong and with an affinity for violence and war.



Here we go again: Queues stretch for kilometres in and out of Auckland as police stop vehicles at a checkpoint. *CREDIT:GETTY*

Hitler's new man was "slim and slender, quick like a greyhound, tough like leather, and hard like Krupp steel". Meanwhile, Soviet Man was learned, muscular, selfless, and austere – disciplined and in control of his emotions. Stalin, unusually, even idealised a "New Soviet Woman", who combined the role of full-time worker with those of wife and mother, as well as committed communist citizen.

The idea was to bring this ideal into being by marinating people in these ideals in a total social experience, where the ideology infiltrates every aspect of life, and might even be imposed by mass policing. That's why this kind of politics had to approach totalitarianism, if not embrace it outright.

The central theory – that total circumstances create new people – is probably true. But it never really succeeded because even the most brutal human beings can't really create total, inescapable, suffocating social experiences. Only forces beyond human control can do that. Forces like, say, a deadly, enormously infectious virus.

I've been thinking about this ever [since we learned that Auckland – Auckland! – went back into lockdown this week](#). This is New Zealand, which just racked up a century of days with no community transmission of COVID-19. The cases that broke this streak fit the most compelling definition of "mystery" cases, such that we're [now hearing theories of it spreading by freight](#).

It might be that New Zealand, like Queensland, suffers no meaningful outbreak from this and leaves lockdown in days, or it might not be. Either way, this event signals the invincibility of this pandemic. It is never over. Not until there's a vaccine that has been widely distributed and taken, or it mutates itself out of deadly existence. We're probably in this for a long, long time.



Illustration: Andrew Dyson *CREDIT:*

New Zealand suggests COVID-19 could become a total, inescapable, suffocating social experience. If so, it will insinuate itself into every aspect of our lives – the way we work, the tiny manners that govern the way we socialise, how we spend our leisure time – and it will do this at length.

Even the places that experience it less in relative terms, like New Zealand and, say, Western Australia, will only be able to do so in isolation, which itself is a suffocating experience. And when mystery cases arrive, as if from the sky, even those places will be constantly reminded of COVID-19's presence.

The logic of a virus like this is totalising. And if it's true that totalising experiences create a "New Man", it seems to me that the pandemic must do the same if it lasts long enough. Eventually we will be changed by this in fundamental ways. A *homo covidicus* will emerge.

Of course, I don't know exactly what that will be. Clearly, the accompanying pandemic of mental health damage carries all kinds of frightening possibilities that people far more qualified than me could elucidate. The same is possibly true of the increased alcohol consumption we're now seeing.

And it's anyone's guess what our newly distanced forms of socialisation might mean for us as sentimental beings capable of intimacy, once they become hardened habits. What happens to a society trained over a long period to treat each other – and even ourselves – as sources of disease rather than enrichment? Perhaps that's another path to the anti-romanticism fascism envisaged.

But if there's one positive I can dare to imagine, it's that we might retrieve what, by my estimate, has only eroded relatively recently: a rich inner life. Our pre-COVID world was one of relentless, endless stimulation, much of it mundane and unfulfilling. It's the constant bombardment we experience from our phones, our workplaces, our various sources of digital entertainment in ways that distract or occupy us but very rarely satisfy us to any depth. This onslaught has slowly made us dependent on constant external prompts, with a need to consume something at all times, whether in the form of products or "content".

We don't so easily sit with ourselves or an idea for extended periods. We are quickly restless and that restlessness is quickly satisfied. We no longer let ourselves get bored, which is often when the greatest moments of insight and creativity arrive. The result is that we are losing our interiority.

COVID-19 hasn't changed that onslaught of stimulation. In fact, our dependency on it probably grows in lockdown. But eventually – if lockdown becomes a regular, repeated phase of living for us, rather than an isolated event – burying ourselves in TikTok or Netflix can't be enough.

For our own mental wellbeing if nothing else, we will have to become genuinely contented with stillness, with the company of our own thoughts, with some kind of non-performative existence.

We saw this in the romantic period of lockdown when everyone seemed to be learning some new skill or other. We've seen it disappear under the fatigue of secondary lockdowns. But perhaps there's a point beyond fatigue, of habituation, where we develop the inner resources to respond to our new modes of living. I hope so, because right now it would be nice to believe *homo covidicus* will give us something to admire.



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