The Corona generation: coming of age in a crisis
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Coming of Age in a Crisis, by Jennie Bristow and Emma Gilland

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This talk is based on a short book written by a mother-daughter team – Jennie Bristow and Emma Gilland – published by Zer0 Books in November 2020. It is not an academic study, but rather a ‘think piece’ written in real time (the early weeks of the UK’s lockdown, in March and April 2020). Our aim was to provide a snapshot of this moment and what it meant for some of the young people in the ‘Class of 2020’ – those about to sit GCSE or A-level exams, or graduate from high school or university. Each chapter contains a sociological reflection by Jennie, a university lecturer and sociologist of generations, followed by a personal reflective account by Emma, a 16-year old student whose GCSE exams were cancelled due to the pandemic. We have also included brief reflections from some young people elsewhere in the UK, and in North America; they are quoted using pseudonyms.

We make no claim to describing or understanding the wider experience of young people across the UK, let alone the world, who are affected by this crisis. Young people’s experience of the pandemic and its aftermath, like their experience of life before, is powerfully framed by social class, ethnicity, gender, and their geographical location – arguably far more so than by their birth cohort. Those experiences will require proper documentation, reflection, and analysis of the kind that it is impossible to do when writing in the moment. So this book is not a treatise designed to predict the generational impact of the pandemic: rather, it is a modest reflection on generational consciousness, in the symbolic context of Covid-19.

Jennie writes:

I had a number of motivations for writing The Corona Generation. As a sociologist focused on the study of generations¹, it was clear that what UK prime minister Boris Johnson described as ‘the worst public health crisis for a generation’² would be epoch-defining. The global spread of the virus and the ‘lockdown’ response meant that its ramifications would spread way beyond practical strategies of infection control. This would be the kind of social shock that, historically, forges a distinctive sense of generational consciousness; an experience that marks out those coming of age right now as distinct both from those who reached adulthood in earlier times, and the younger ones who will be growing up in the so-called ‘new normal’.

That is not to say that the pandemic will determine young people’s futures, in the fatalistic way that commentators are already suggesting for ‘Generation C’.³ Nor does it mean that

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¹ For details of my publications, see: [http://jbristow.co.uk/books](http://jbristow.co.uk/books)
³ See for example: Mull, A. (2020) ‘Generation C Has Nowhere to Turn; Recent history suggests young people could see their careers derailed, finances shattered, and social lives upended’, The Atlantic, 13 April.
these past months have been worse for young people than for others: it has been a miserable time all round, and for older people and those most vulnerable to Covid-19, the virus has presented a dangerous, terrifying threat. But in the same way that 9/11 marked the generation known as ‘Millennials’, and the First World War gave rise to the disenchantment expressed by the ‘Generation of 1914’, this sudden reality shift is likely be formative for those currently making the transition between adulthood and childhood. Hence the ‘Corona generation’ – named for a crown, not a virus; a social shock, not a natural disease.

Generations can best be understood as powerful ‘concepts of existence’, which embody the experience of history in those who come of age during moments of social change and crisis. Attempts to understand how ‘social generations’ are forged have focused on the significance of what June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner describe as ‘traumatic events’. People coming of age in periods of accelerated social change develop a distinct perspective, arising from the fraught encounter between the world as it was and the world as it is.

Understanding the role of social shocks in forging a generation’s sense of itself, and its relation to wider society, follows a sociological theory developed in the 1920s by the Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim. In his influential essay ‘The Problem of Generations’, Mannheim theorized that generational consciousness comes about from the interaction between cohorts on the cusp of adulthood, and wider social events and cultural forces. During periods of accelerated social change, the past and present collide, creating a schism between the way things were and the way things are. This is what gives members of a generation a sense of fellow-feeling with others of a similar age, and a sense of distinction from older or younger generations.

Mannheim argued that consciousness, in terms of the possibility of ‘really questioning and reflecting on things’, emerges around the age of 17, ‘at the point where personal experimentation with life begins’. It is this emergence of a reflective individual, active in society, that gives youth both the ‘freshness’ of its contact with society, and its dynamic relationship with cultural renewal:

The ‘up-to-dateness’ of youth therefore consists in their being closer to the ‘present’ problems...and in the fact that they are dramatically aware of a process of destabilization and take sides in it. All this while, the older generation cling to the reorientation that had been the drama of their youth.

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Ibid., pp. 300-1.

While everyone’s world has been rocked by the Covid-19 crisis, the destabilization experienced by young people is particularly intense. It comes at a time when they are just beginning to discover themselves, following a path into adulthood that, for all it has never been smooth, has been laid down since their birth in a world they are beginning to discover but do not yet truly know. The smashing of this path, and the uncertain social and economic future that lies ahead, is now their reality. While older generations seek to understand times of crisis by drawing on their experience of previous social shocks, the young have no basis for such comparisons, and are forced to make meaning of the experience simply through living it.

The young people whom we talked to described the impact of the sudden disappearance of educational milestones that had previously been considered essential rites of passage on the journey towards adulthood. Maria, 16, should have been sitting her GCSE exams in summer 2020 before moving on to sixth form college. She wrote:

Something that was supposed to happen in June was happening in mid-March and you could feel the attitude in the air just wasn’t the same. The school Assembly was hastily thrown together with a few teachers getting mildly choked up during half-hearted speeches. Afterwards we were herded, like little sheep, to the basketball courts at the bottom of the school, and told that we had an allotted half hour to sign shirts and say our goodbyes. After that they basically evicted us from the school. After all, we weren’t important to them anymore, we didn’t have GCSEs to pass, we didn’t have anything to learn from them. So we left.

Gracie, a university student in the US, had been anticipating her college graduation ceremony before the campus abruptly closed in March. She said:

I sat at home with my friends because we weren’t allowed to go anywhere. We painted our nails, had some wine then went to bed – in the morning I packed my stuff and went … My friends and I were talking about how when we have kids, we are going to be those parents who are obsessed with graduation because we didn’t get to have one and I think that will affect our generation, and value our college or high school experience in a different way. Because we lost some of it.

The sudden shift in norms and expectations framing the way that young people have had to consider their personal and social interactions has not happened on this scale, or with this intensity, since the Second World War. Social media technologies became young people’s sole source of interaction with the outside world: their friends, teachers, extended family, and the news. Prolonged isolation from physical contact is likely to have a significant impact on young people’s growing-up – particularly for those on the cusp of independence, who will keenly experience the difference between life before and after social distancing. Leah, 17, wrote:

Me and my friends... had been planning this summer for a long time as it would be our first real opportunity to have complete freedom and independence. Because of this, most of our time is being spent planning and thinking about how we will make the most of this freedom once this is over, but this is causing us to wish this whole
period of time away as we are only really using it to think about the future which feels like a real shame.

A further motivation for writing the book was that, as a parent and a university teacher, I was particularly disturbed by the speed with which schools and universities across the world were forced to close their doors, and by the apparent nonchalance about when they might admit their students again. The justification for these closures was a narrow focus on infection control, with little consideration given to the reasons why, particularly during a national crisis, educational institutions have a vital role to play in helping to steer young people through difficult times.

School is the place where the adult world meets the child world, where social norms and values are communicated across the generations, and also where children gain the sense of belonging to a generation of their peers. In giving children access to their society’s cultural heritage, education takes children outside the febrile tensions of their daily existence and gives them a wider, deeper sense of perspective on the human condition, and the tools to know and understand life’s mysteries. Yet in the rush to close schools and the reluctance to reopen them, the educational and moral purpose of schooling seemed to be held in remarkably light regard.

During lockdown, ‘schoolwork’ was reduced to the project of following the curriculum online, with parents charged with getting their kids through their daily tasks, and teachers reduced to disembodied instruction-and-feedback facilitators. This created a situation where young people suddenly had to take responsibility for ‘teaching themselves’. As Cleo, 17, described:

As a year 12 student, coronavirus has led to some disruption in my school life, from having to teach myself three A-levels including a foreign language at home to having had an A-level exam affected by the virus. Teaching myself has been difficult during this time mostly because I do not know this content, particularly with my language course I am essentially teaching myself to be fluent which is near impossible without anyone to correct my mistakes.

For some young people, the initial few weeks provided a welcome break from the treadmill of school, allowing them to work at their own pace and engage in other, creative activities that might otherwise be ‘squeezed out’. But as the weeks dragged on, the sense of feeling left alone to study provoked some confusion, and anxiety about the future. Laura, 15, wrote:

Despite the online schooling provided, I am relying heavily on myself to make sure that I am still on track. It is difficult to know if I am teaching myself the right content, which is resulting in me spending more time on each subject than I normally would do at school. It also means that when we do go back to school, a lot of content will be rushed to ensure we can get through our courses on time, once again making the student responsible for a lot of their education. While it is good to become independent learners, these are not the ideal circumstances, as not only are GCSEs stressful enough but lots of the content cannot be taught from home.
There is nothing wrong with independent learning. I work in a university, where developing undergraduate students to ‘become independent learners’ is an important focus of the first year. But those are young adults; secondary school pupils are children, who need to be taught. The blasé way in which it was accepted that children can and should teach themselves the curriculum, supervised by parents who are unfamiliar with what is being taught, how it is being taught, and often have their own work to do as well, revealed a deep lack of understanding about what education is and what teachers do.

Numerous commentators have rightly noted that the practical impact of school closures is likely to have the most negative impact on children from less affluent backgrounds, and those with special educational needs. But the symbolic impact is significant for all families. All the things that were previously communicated to young people about the importance of attending school, engaging in their lessons, and working hard for their exams were indefinitely suspended. This raised some wider questions about the Corona Generation’s encounter with education, and with the institutions of adult society.

One of the most peculiar features of the response to the pandemic is that it has mobilized populations around the imperative of staying indoors, and away from each other. Teenagers were not only been expelled from the educational world; they have been effectively barred from engaging in a wider social response to the unfolding social and economic crisis. In this sense, their experience has been one of conditioned impotence. Rather than engage healthy young people in the difficult questions about what should be done, we locked them in a physical and intellectual quarantine, and told them to put up and shut up.

The depiction of young people as viral ‘super-spreaders’ – troublesome, unwitting germs on legs – have marshalled a narrative of fear and suspicion about them, in place of a calm discussion with them. Messages targeted at young people about the problem of asymptomatic transmission reveal a disturbing development, in the way that the youthful, healthy body has been pathologized as a particularly dangerous vector for the spread of disease. This message was starkly put by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), back in March:

‘Today I have a message for young people: You are not invincible, this virus could put you in hospital for weeks or even kill you. Even if you don’t get sick the choices you make about where you go could be the difference between life and death for someone else.’

Since then, the focus on the particular danger allegedly posed to wider society from healthy young people who might unwittingly be infected with Covid-19 has become the justification for keeping schools closed for several months, and making considerations about opening university campuses increasingly fraught. A one-sided emphasis on infection control has overridden deeper questions about adult authority and responsibility to the younger generations.

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Our book argues that, during the period of lockdown, young people experienced the retreat of adults’ general sense of care and responsibility. Shut up in their homes, they were subjected to the sole authority of their parents; yet in practice, parents were accorded very limited authority. Daily decisions about what teenagers could do – who to see, where to go, what time to be home – were taken out of parents’ hands by the legal requirement to ‘stay at home’. This resulted in an uneasy sense of who was in charge. Teenagers had to navigate parents’ different interpretations of the rules, balancing the ‘rightness’ of their own parents’ approach with that of their friends’ parents.

This also had implications for young people’s privacy. Young people have had to conduct intimate conversations with others in the knowledge that they could be monitored or overheard. This was an issue for parents as well: conflicts between parents, online meetings with work colleagues, and sensitive discussions that might normally be had ‘not in front of the children’ were played out in the theatre of the entire household. During the early lockdown period, all physical interactions with people outside of one’s own household had to take place in public space – putting young people under constant surveillance.

The privations of the strict lockdown period that we discuss in the book were, thankfully, temporary. As we moved into September, schools started up again, young people were able to get together their friends, and members of the benighted Class of 2020 embarked upon the next stage of their lives. Although they will never get back the Big Moments they have missed, there will be many others still to come. But the cavalier way in which adult society suspended its central responsibility to guide and educate young people through periods of crisis has had a significant symbolic impact, and will continue to do so: as we saw in the disorientation provoked by Lockdown 3 in early 2021. In this sense, our book is as much about how adults have come to think about young people as it is about how the Corona Generation might come to think about itself.

*Emma writes:*

For me, the cancellation of exams was a huge deal. The work that had been put in seemed worthless and the activities that dominated my time were cancelled. My evenings, and then days, turned into a loose end. The first few weeks brought a new concept of time, as days were longer than before, leaving us to wonder how long this particularly unstable structure would last and what the days ahead would be filled with – most likely to be tedious tasks and useless boredom.

Boredom and independence are often considered two fundamentals of growing up, but being quarantined with your parents strips away your independence and hits you with boredom in a new intensified way. For many young people, the restrictions took them back years into their childhood, as parties and school were cancelled, and we were denied all socializing outside the walls of our home. Despite our complaints about school, it provides an escape from the control of parents and bickering with siblings, to be with people you choose and can relate to, with the distractions and lessons keeping you somewhat entertained and distracted, away from the uncertainty of adolescence.
Lack of distraction – that’s the biggest hole. With seven extra hours in the day, you need the distraction of everyday life the most, where there is no need to think about yourself, your flaws and the future as you are wrapped up in teenage drama, a happy escape. But when this had gone, it left a lot of us realizing how lonely and repetitive life really is – we need the walls of school, the voices and repressed laughter, this helps us muddle through our lives. This excitement of the ordinary can’t be replaced by Netflix and Instagram, despite what many of us thought. It is remarkable that we stayed as calm as we did when locked in our houses, showing the huge effect on our views and priorities as the fear of infection became a much greater issue; we were prepared to suffer the mundane to prevent an overwhelming peak.

Globally it seems that for many there was a mature response to the coronavirus as everyone, even the younger generation, has missed out on something due to the lockdown procedures. Exams, holidays, or sports; something was now missing from people’s lives which they had planned for and were excited by, contributing to their motivation and drive. However, despite the sense of loss, everyone was trying to get through and help however they could. Despite the limit to what we could do, the sense of community seemed to grow. To me this was quite impressive, as it shows some selflessness which hadn’t been seen in many people before, as they took the sacrifice and used the time in a different way, trying to focus on the bigger picture.

The national movement to fight coronavirus was at first refreshing for many of us as a break from our own identity politics. As many phrased it, ‘we are living through a future history question’ – a moment quite different, frightening yet extraordinary. Although there was more time to reflect on ourselves, we were engulfed by global, political, and community affairs as we tried to fight the pandemic. Some young people were more involved than others, but we were all talking about it; no longer obsessing with fragile relationships but more on the world around us. However, in saying this, many people were more focused on the effects closer to them, which is reasonable enough, but neglecting the bigger picture, such as the issues of unemployment and lack of liberty.

The fact that many of us believed we should isolate to help reduce deaths and pressures on the health service is hugely positive, but we were not weighing up the effects on many in the wider community, like the independent business owners, the recently unemployed, and the completely isolated, as many people were living in misery alone and with their lives in turmoil while we were trying to save the lives of others. This provides a huge question about priorities, not only of the government but our own beliefs. The pandemic has brought an additional sense of independence as we are having to deal with every situation alone, mostly isolated from those we would normally talk to – especially when dealing with school as the work has to be done independently of the teacher, so we are having to puzzle it through, more self-sufficiently than before.

While writing the book we saw a shift in how young people saw the world and related to the lives around them, as many of us became more involved, invested and excited by the news of the events globally. As the lockdown months have passed this has not faded but simply shifted focus. The Black Lives Matter campaign caused a huge spark of passion and raised the voice of the younger generations – after first hitting Instagram and then the streets, it
felt like many people were really passionate about sharing solidarity with their views and trying to solve global inequalities. This was later followed by petitions to save Yemen from a humanitarian crisis, which felt less passionate and more distant, but it was still a sign of awareness of the wider world and search for change towards equality.

As we came into the summer there was less caution than anticipated as people were finding their way of adapting to the new world. Many of us were just anxious to save the summer and make up for the earthquake which has been 2020; the general feeling of precaution is modified by people’s recognition of the time we have lost. However, there is less anger and resentment than there could have been; people are no longer holding onto what they have lost but trying to make the most of what they have. This has definitely shaped the way we as young people view our lives, our phones, and our place in the world, but we have not completely lost the more innocent joy for days at the beach and time spent living, not fighting to make a change. Overall I think the lockdown has shown us that we can have some choice over our lives, beliefs, and voice, but there are so many huge influences on our lives, which have now become clear to us.