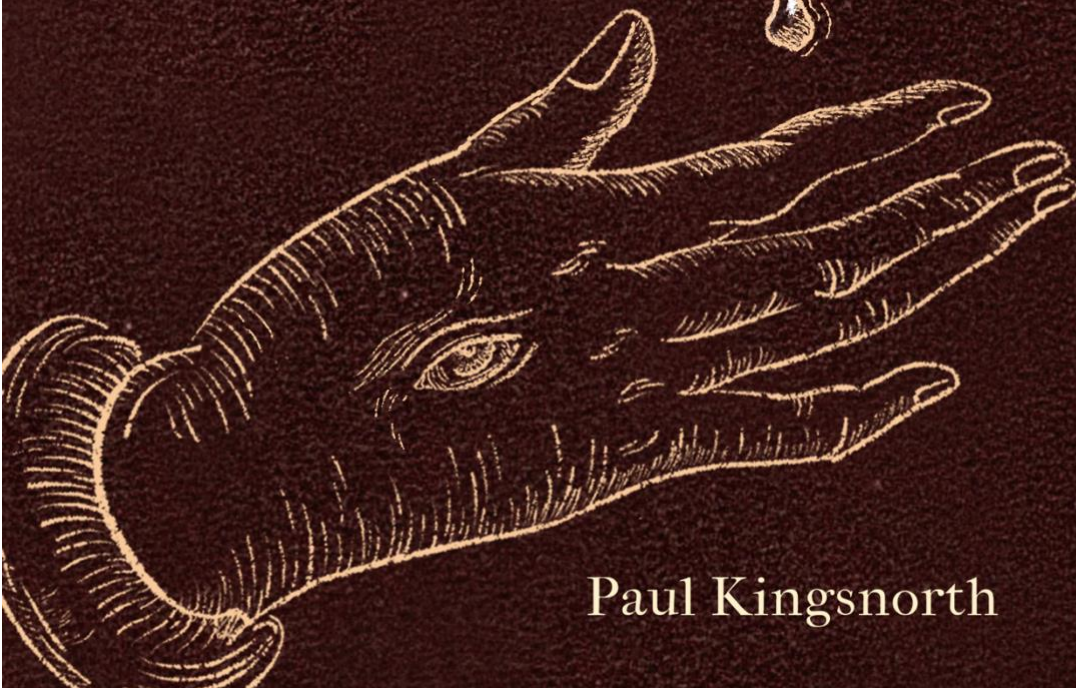




The
VACCINE MOMENT



Covid, control and the Machine



Paul Kingsnorth

Everybody knows that the plague is coming
Everybody knows that it's moving fast
Everybody knows that the naked man and woman
Are just a shining artifact of the past
Everybody knows the scene is dead
But there's gonna be a meter on your bed
That will disclose
What everybody knows

Leonard Cohen

If only we had stood together against the common threat, we could easily have defeated it. So, why didn't we? ... We didn't love freedom enough ... we hurried to submit. We submitted with pleasure! ... We purely and simply deserved everything that happened afterward.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

In December 2021, I wrote three essays on the coronavirus, the vaccines and the radical changes in society they had precipitated, as part of my online essay project [The Abbey of Misrule](#). None of what I wrote, in my view, was either especially original or especially controversial. In a sane time - in a time, say, which had not been stirred into craziness by two years of media hysteria, state dishonesty and corporate mendacity - I don't think that anything I wrote would have been comment-worthy. But then, in a sane time I wouldn't have needed to write it.

As it was, these essays found a very large audience all over the world, one way larger than they were originally intended for. Huge numbers of people told me how useful, or even life-saving, they found them. Many others told me that I was a paranoid conspiracy theorist and 'anti-vaxxer' whose words would lead to mass death (this is not hyperbole: I'm just quoting.) These are the times we all find ourselves in. It is impossible, mostly, to speak and be heard, whatever we want to say. We are all hoping that these times will soon change. But my belief is that if those of us who fear the direction of travel do not now speak out, then that change will be for the worse.

Who am I? I am an English novelist, essayist and poet, a former environmental activist and magazine editor, a smallholder and home educator. All my life, I have used my words to try and delineate the shape of the rising system of technocracy we are living under - what I have taken to calling 'the Machine.' It seems to me that technological modernity takes us at speed away from nature and real human culture, towards a fake, mediated, totalitarian hyperreality, and that too many of us are just fine with this direction of travel. I am not fine with it. These essays may appeal to others who feel the same.

That's who I am; or some of who I am. Some things I am not include: a doctor, a virologist, any kind of scientist, any kind of politician and any kind of ideologue. These three essays do not pretend to any expertise on either virus or vaccine, but then they are only tangentially about those things. What I am writing about here is the systems of authoritarian control which have been built around us these last eighteen months, for

which both virus and vaccine have provided a pretext. I am trying to get to the root of what is going on, to understand the stories we are telling ourselves about it all, and especially to emphasise how those stories are means in themselves of exerting control over our future direction of travel.

The reception of the essays made it seem like a good idea to collect them in one place, and to give them away for free. I don't know what 2022 will bring, but it will offer us clarity over the final direction of the covid clampdown. Whether our new digital control systems fade away as the viral threat does, or whether - more likely - they are permanently cemented in place, with radical consequences for the future shape of society, will be clear enough in twelve month's time. I hope that some of these words may be helpful for those who are deciding where to stand as the year unfurls.

Paul Kingsnorth
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I: ON THE DAYS OF REVELATION

Perhaps it's because I'm English, or perhaps it's my age, or perhaps it's just blind prejudice, but when I wake to the news that the Austrian government has interned an entire third of its national population as a 'danger to public health', a chill runs down my spine.

Austria, I think to myself. *Ah*.

I look at the news photos of armed, masked, black-clad police stopping people in the streets to ask for their digital papers, and I read stories of others arrested for leaving their own house more than the permitted once a day, and I hear Austrian politicians intoning that those who refuse to accede to the injection are to be shunned and scapegoated until they acquiesce. Then I watch [interviews](#) with 'ordinary people', and they say that the 'unvaxxed' had it coming. Some of them say that they should all be jailed, these enemies of the people. At best, the 'anti-vaxxers' are paranoid and misinformed. At worst they are malicious, and should be punished. A few days later I wake up to some more news about Austria: from next year, everyone in the country will have a covid vaccine [forced into them by the state](#), overriding their right to what certain people, who have gone very quiet recently, used to call 'bodily autonomy.'

Then I look across the border at Germany. I see that in Germany, politicians are also considering interning the 'vaccine hesitant', and are currently discussing forcing vaccination upon every citizen. By the end of the winter, says Germany's bracingly honest health minister, Germans will be 'vaccinated, cured or dead.' There is apparently no fourth option.

They have been busy in Germany. Recently they put up fences in Hamburg to separate the Bad Unvaxxed from the Good Vaxxed at the Christmas markets. Outdoors. Perhaps they will also provide the Good people with rocks to throw across those fences. The mood certainly seems ripe. A [cartoon](#) recently published in the mainstream, high-circulation newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* featured a man sitting on his sofa playing a first-person shooter game in which the targets were unvaccinated people. The caption described it as "a big hit under the

Christmas tree.”

Ha ha ha, I think. Germany. Fences. Internment. Forced injections. Armed police. Scan your code. Shoot the unvaxxed.

Ha ha ha.

I am watching all this from Ireland, the country which currently has the highest adult vaccination rate in Western Europe, at over 94% of the population. At the same time, curiously, we have some of the highest covid infection rates in Western Europe too. The government has not been able to explain this fact, but it is a trend that has recently manifested in some other highly-vaccinated places too: Gibraltar, Israel, West Flanders. High levels of vaccination do not seem to correspond with low-levels of disease; often quite the opposite.

In other parts of the world, strange things are happening too. Africa, for example. Africa’s population is the largest, fastest-growing and materially poorest of any continent. Few governments there can afford to supply their people with the pricey corporate vaccines which we in the West have staked our nations on. Only 6% of Africa’s population is vaccinated, and national healthcare systems barely exist in many places, yet the WHO [describes](#) the continent as ‘one of the least affected regions in the world’ by the virus. In fact, the richer, more ‘developed’ parts of the world often seem to be suffering worst from the pandemic.

Nobody seems to be able to explain any of this, but that hasn’t changed the official direction of travel. Certainly in Ireland, the script remains the same. For six months we have been living with vaccine apartheid, with the ‘unvaxxed’ excluded from much of society, but it hasn’t worked. Rates of infection are shooting up as winter arrives - as you might expect with a respiratory virus. We were all told recently to work from home, and another lockdown seems to be on the cards. A midnight curfew has recently been imposed on pubs and nightclubs. This is odd, as only vaccinated people have been allowed into them for months, and we have repeatedly been assured that vaccinated people are safe to be around.

In an honest society, all of this would have been subject to robust public discussion. We would have seen scientists of all opinions openly debating on TV and radio and in the press; views of all kinds aired on social media;

journalists properly investigating reports of both vaccine successes and vaccine dangers; serious explorations of alternative treatments; public debates about the balance between civil liberties and public health, and what 'public health' even means.

But we have not seen this and we will not see it, for debate, like dissent, is out of fashion. The media here in Ireland has not asked a critical question of anyone in authority for at least eighteen months. Google's algorithms are busy [burying](#) inconvenient data, while the social media channels from which most people receive their worldview are removing or suppressing critical opinions, even if they come from virologists or [editors of the British Medical Journal](#).

Day after day, I have been waking and wondering: *what is going on?*

*

Internment. Mandatory medication. Segregation of whole sections of society. Mass sackings. A drumbeat media consensus. The systematic censoring of dissent. The deliberate creation by the state and the press of a climate of fear and suspicion. What could possibly justify this? Perhaps the combination of a terrible pandemic which killed or maimed large percentages of those it infected, and the existence of a safe and reliable medicine which was proven to prevent its spread. This, of course, is what we are said to be living through. This is the Narrative.

But it is clear enough by now that the Narrative is not true. Covid-19 can be a nasty illness, and should be taken seriously, especially by those who are especially vulnerable to it. But it is nowhere near dangerous enough - if anything could be - to justify the creation of a global police state. As for the vaccines: well, let's just acknowledge that vaccination has become a subject which it is virtually impossible to discuss with any calmness or clarity, at least in public. As with almost every other big issue in the West today, opinion is divided along tribal lines and filtered through the foetid swamp of anti-social media, to emerge monstrous and dripping into the light.

Often, in an argument, what people think they are arguing about is not the real subject of disagreement, which is deeper and often unspoken, if it is even understood. So it is here. The divisions that have opened up in

society about the covid vaccines are not really about the covid vaccines at all: they are about what vaccination symbolises in this moment. What it means to be 'vaxxed' or 'unvaxxed', safe or dangerous, clean or dirty, sensible or irresponsible, compliant or independent: these are questions about what it means to be a good member of society, and what society even is, and they are detonating like depth charges beneath the surface of the culture.

This is not to say that the surface disagreements don't matter. They do. There are plenty of good reasons to be concerned about these medications and their enforced use. Here we have a [novel technology](#), never before used at scale or for this purpose, used to create a series of vaccines which have been rolled out to millions [before adequate clinical trials are complete](#). This is an unprecedented situation - as is vaccination for a respiratory virus in the middle of a pandemic, which some people with serious expertise [warn](#) may worsen the situation rather than end it. The companies manufacturing these things are making equally unprecedented hourly profits, and their long histories of [dishonesty and cover-ups](#), plus the fact that they are legally immune from any liability for problems arising from these vaccines, makes it impossible to take seriously their assurances of safety. And when we witness an active state/media [campaign against early treatment](#) of a disease - the precise opposite of what every doctor is taught at medical school - along with disturbing censorship by media and social media companies of the [mounting](#) evidence of [short-term side-effects](#), it ought to be clear that something is happening which cannot be explained by the story we are being told.

For all these reasons and more, I have not been vaccinated against covid, and I don't plan to be. This does not make me 'anti-vax' - a fake category that is designed to feed into the ongoing culture war narrative which separates the good from the bad people, and leads both sides in that war to demonise the other. I am not against vaccination, and I certainly wouldn't imagine I had a right to tell others what to do with their bodies. I don't believe that the available covid vaccines are ineffective - though they do not do what they were initially sold to us as doing - and I can see good reasons for people, especially vulnerable people, to take them if they choose.

I expect that readers of this essay could argue with me about my decision if they felt like it, and I expect I could argue back. This is what much of the world has been doing since these vaccines arrived on the scene. We could all throw peer-reviewed studies that we don't really understand at each other, and they would all miss the mark because the vaccine is not the point. The point is what it symbolises - and what it is being used to build.

I am a writer. I know how to construct stories. I know what makes them succeed or fail, and I have a nose for when a story does not hang together. The covid Narrative is just such a story. It doesn't fit together, even on its own terms. Something is wrong. The surface tale does not reflect what lies beneath. And what lies beneath is what interests me now.

We live in an apocalyptic time, in the original sense of the Greek word *apokalypsis*: revelation. What is happening on the surface is revealing what has always lain beneath, but which in normal times is hidden from view. All of the action now is in the underworld. Beneath the arguments about whether or not to take a vaccine that may or may not work safely, glides something older, deeper, slower: something with all the time in the world. Some great spirit whose work is to use these fractured times to reveal to us all what we need to see: things hidden since the foundation of the modern world.

Covid is a revelation. It has laid bare splits in the social fabric that were always there but could be ignored in better times. It has revealed the compliance of the legacy media and the power of Silicon Valley to curate and control the public conversation. It has confirmed the sly dishonesty of political leaders, and their ultimate obeisance to corporate power. It has shown up 'The Science' for the compromised ideology it is.

Most of all, it has revealed the authoritarian streak that lies beneath so many people, and which always emerges in fearful times. In the last month alone I have watched media commentators calling for censorship of their political opponents, philosophy professors justifying mass internment, and human rights lobby groups remaining silent about 'vaccine passports.' I have watched much of the political left transition openly into the authoritarian movement it probably always was, and countless 'liberals' campaigning against liberty. As freedom after freedom has been taken away, I have watched intellectual after intellectual justify it all. I have

been reminded of what I always knew: cleverness has no relationship to wisdom.

I have learnt more about human nature in the last two years than in my preceding forty-seven. I have learnt some things about myself too, and I don't especially like them either. I have noticed my ongoing temptation to become a partisan: to judge and condemn those on the other side of the question - those sheeple, those malicious enemies of Truth. I have noticed my tendency to seek out only sources of information which confirm my beliefs. Revelation is never comfortable.

Most of all, though, what the covid apocalypse has revealed to me is that when people are frightened, they can be easily controlled.

Control: this is the story of the times. Across the world we are seeing an unprecedented claim to control staked by the forces of the state, in alliance with the forces of corporate capital, over your life and mine. All of it converges on the revealed symbol of our age: the smartphone-enabled QR code that has, with frightening speed and in near-silence, become the new passport to a full human life. As ever, our tools have turned on us. Another revelation: they were never our tools to begin with. We were theirs.

Amongst the vast flock of contested facts that wheel around this virus like a murmuration of starlings, darkening the skies and addling the mind, one stands out. It is the single fact that blows a cathedral-shaped hole in the strategy being pursued by governments at present, and which offers a glimpse into the crypt. It is the fact that these vaccines, whatever their efficacy in other areas, [do not prevent transmission of the virus](#).

This single fact - which has long been known but is barely ever mentioned in the 'mainstream', if such a thing exists anymore - blows apart the case for vaccine passports, segregation, lockdowns of the 'unvaxxed' and all such similar measures. Even if you believe (or pretend to) that this virus is dangerous enough to justify the radical new forms of authoritarianism which have emerged around it, those forms will fail anyway if both vaccinated and unvaccinated people can spread it; which we know they can.

What, then, can be the justification for the system of technological control and monitoring which has arisen around us with curious speed and

smoothness over the last year? And what could explain the strangely similar language in which the world's governments explain and justify this system, which so many have adopted in similar ways with similar technologies in similar timeframes? That the 'unvaxxed' are a danger to society, and that the 'vaxxed' must be protected from them is the pretext. But as we are seeing on the ground in Ireland, the pretext is baseless.

If we were operating, as we pretend to be, from the ground of reason - if we really were 'following the science' - then we would be dismantling these systems at this point. Instead we are moving deeper into them. We are being herded into a future in which scanning a code to prove you are a safe and obedient member of society may be a permanent feature of life, as unquestioned as credit cards and driver's licences. We are moving towards enforced mandatory vaccination of entire populations - including children, who - and prison sentences for those who refuse. By winter's end, we could be living in a world in which the state has taken full charge of our bodies, and our only chance of remaining active members of society is to submit to their every instruction, and agree to permanent digital monitoring to prove our compliance.

Eighteen months ago, anyone suggesting that this would be the direction of travel when this virus arrived in town would have been dismissed as a paranoid David Icke fanboy. But over that eighteen months we have moved smoothly from 'two weeks to flatten the curve' to 'mandatory injections to avoid prison.' We have normalised this, and accepted it. We have not asked questions. Those who have dissented have been censored, silenced, bullied and abused.

Even as I was writing this essay, the situations in Germany and Austria were eclipsed by news from Down Under. This weekend, the Australian army began [shifting](#) covid-infected people, and those who are in contact with them, into state-run camps. Parts of the Northern Territories of Australia have entered a 'hard lockdown', in which nobody can leave their house for any reason at all except for urgent medical treatment. Those who have contracted the virus, or simply been in contact with someone who has, will now be forcibly 'transferred' by soldiers to a government-run camp where they will be held until the state decrees they are safe enough to be released.

These ‘mandatory supervised quarantine facilities’ have been used to quarantine incoming travellers for the last year. Now they are being used to ‘contain’ Australian citizens. You can watch this measure being announced by the government [here](#). You can watch an interview with someone who was taken against her will to the biggest of these camps [here](#). You can see another Australian politician fulminating about the ‘unvaxxed’ and what he would like to do to them [here](#). If after this you are not filled with foreboding, then I don’t know what to say to you.

My own sense of foreboding is deepening daily. Beneath the surface, down in those depths, I am far from the only one who can see what is emerging. The Narrative does not hang together, the story does not gel, but it is doing its job nonetheless. It is being used to summon forth and justify an unprecedented authoritarian technocracy which is hemming us all in with no consent, no debate, and no right to opt out.

In a short but momentous two years, this is who we have become. We in the West, who have spent decades, if not centuries, lecturing the rest of the world about ‘freedom’, and sometimes trying to bomb them into accepting it. We who invented this thing called ‘liberalism’; we who are now burying it. It didn’t take much, did it, for our words to be revealed as hollow?

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Nearly a decade ago, I wrote an essay called *The Barcode Moment*. It’s collected in my book [Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist](#), but you can also read the original version, in three parts, [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). It was about the advance of intrusive technologies, and the question it posed was: *where will you draw your line?* I was trying to work out for myself the answer to this question, which has nagged at me for years. At what moment does the direction of travel of the Machine become so obvious, so intolerable, so frightening, that you can no longer acquiesce? What is the breaking point? For some people it was smartphones. For others it might have been social media. These days I think that the really smart people stepped off the carousel at dial-up modems and went quietly into the woods.

That essay was easy to write compared to this one. Ten years ago, I shivered at the sight of Google’s new [Glass](#) technology, which in retrospect was an early shot at a prototype [metaverse](#), and wrote about

what it might portend. It turns out that it's a dozen times easier to write about a future of technological control that might be around the corner than it is to write about it as it manifests around you.

But this is what is happening today. Over the last six months I have been writing about the evolution of the vast grid of technological control that I call [the Machine](#): where it came from, what powers it, how we manifest it in our culture and in our individual lives. Over the next few months, I was planning to write about how it manifests in the here and now, in our politics, society and culture. I will still be doing that, but I find myself being overtaken by events. By the time I finish writing these essays, we will be living in a very different world to the one we lived in when I started them. We already are.

The covid pandemic has proven to be the perfect controlled experiment for the rollout of the next stage of the Machine's evolution. This is the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle without which the rest cannot be deciphered. The Narrative does not make sense until we understand that we are watching a new, radical form of techno-authoritarianism unfold before our eyes. It is not an accident, and it is not temporary. In the EU, Smartphone-enabled vaccine passes have been [on the cards since at least 2018](#). The entire pandemic scenario was [wargamed](#) less than a year before it happened. The technology was ready, and the tightening of the ratchet long anticipated. All that was needed was a trigger event. As I wrote in my last essay here, the future in a collapsing society is a combination of both [breakdown and clampdown](#). So it begins.

No 'conspiracy theory' is required for this to be true. It doesn't mean that the virus is not real or dangerous, or that Bill Gates wants to inject you with microchips (well, he might, but that's a separate conversation ...) No hidden cabal of people needs to be in control. The people who are in control - or at least, who aspire to be - are out in plain sight, and have been for years, and most of us either don't notice or don't care. We are too busy playing with the toys they make for us.

What we are seeing is the Machine doing what it always does; what I have traced through its history for the past six months. It is taking advantage of events to cement its dominance. It is colonising our societies and our bodies and our minds. It is replacing nature with technology, and culture with commerce. It is making us parts in its operational matrix, and it is

using our fear to justify its tightening grip. When we are afraid, we welcome control, we welcome authoritarianism, we welcome strong leaders who will save Us by excluding Them. We willingly give up our freedom for safety, and end up with neither. Our fear leads us by the hand towards the next stage of our long journey away from Earth and into artifice; away from human freedom and into the digital net.

Perhaps you think this sounds exaggerated. Hysterical, even. Just a few months ago I might have agreed. A year ago, I almost certainly would. But a year ago I had not seen what I have seen now. I had not seen the smartphone passports, the QR scanners, the meek public compliance, the deliberate whipping up of [fear and hatred](#) by political leaders. I had not seen the mandatory vaccination orders. I had not seen the camps.

Next time I will write more on what I see happening, and where it is heading. But for now, it is enough to say that my personal Vaccine Moment has arrived. Where once I was on the fence, now I am firmly off it. Even if I were to be convinced that these vaccines worked safely, I could never get myself a vaccine passport and acquiesce in the technological segregation of society. I could never scan my code without shivering. I cannot participate in this.

We all have a breaking point, and we all should, because this is the means by which our human intuition screams to us that something is wrong. This is mine. I will not go along with what is happening. I will not validate what is emerging. I will resist it. I will take my stand.

What has been interesting about just the last few days, as I have struggled with how to express myself here, is that huge numbers of people have taken to the streets to say the same thing: *enough*. As the pressure builds, the explosions begin. Following widespread walkouts and strikes in the USA in recent weeks, hundreds of thousands of people across Europe have begun to [take to the streets](#) to oppose the closing-in of the technium. Few of these vast demonstrations have been reported in the mainstream media - another of those facts which, if the world was what it pretends to be, would ring alarm bells, but which we have become inured to in the age of the [Spectacle](#).

But something is happening out there. It's as if the Vaccine Moment is some kind of thoughtform, drifting through the air, settling on millions of

us at once like soft rain. Or perhaps it is more that a fog has suddenly cleared. Perhaps more and more people are coming to see that what is happening now is the Rubicon of our age. Nothing will be the same after this, and it is not intended to be. If we don't want the future to look like a QR code flickering across a human face forever, we are going to have to do something about it.

II: ON SYMBOL & STORY

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 take 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 chapter of a book 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. This is a situation 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 in the first chapter 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.

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 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. We will see, in the final chapter, where this leads.

III: HOW TO THINK ABOUT KLAUS SCHWAB

When is a conspiracy theory not a conspiracy theory? The answer to this question will have a bearing on the shape of the coming world.

In these essays, I've been writing about the stories we tell about the pandemic. In the first, I explained why I had grown to disbelieve much of the official story - what I called the Narrative - about the virus and the response to it. For me, the straws that broke the back of this story were the Austrian lockdown of the 'unvaxxed', and the Australian quarantine camps: after this, I couldn't tell myself that what was going on was anything to do with any sane definition of 'public health'.

Maybe I was slow to get there, but I was only one of many who reached the same conclusion. This last month seems to have marked a tipping point, as [resistance](#) continues to [grow](#) to what is happening, and hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets across the world, from Turin to Paris, London to Vienna, Melbourne to Barcelona, Christchurch to Tblisi. Mandates, passports, segregation, quarantine camps, censorship, the chilling [demonisation of the 'unvaxxed'](#): all of this seems to have brought a new clarity about the unprecedented territory into which we are headed.

In the second essay, I tried to dig into why so many of us see this situation so differently: why those mandates and passports, for example, are seen by some as a necessary health measure which it is irresponsible to refuse, and by others as the beginning of a tyranny which must be resisted. I looked at how the stories we tell about the world determine our responses to the corona moment, and how these stories can divide us against each other, even as we all aim for our own version of a healthier society.

This time around, I want to look at the story the Machine is telling us about these times. I want to look at the world we are being rapidly steered into, as covid-19 becomes a kind of techno-political sandbox: a testing-ground for new ways of being human in an increasingly post-human world.

Stories are the means by which we navigate reality, but they are also the means by which we control it - and by which we are controlled. Control the story, control the population: this has been understood since the Pharaohs, and it is why the narrative battle over covid has been so fierce. It is why the media and the social media companies have worked so hard to shut down difficult questions about the vaccines, and why constant efforts have been made to silence, intimidate or bully people who are said to be spreading 'misinformation'. And it is also why we have seen a new focus on a very different kind of storyteller, one previously mocked but now increasingly looked upon with both nervousness and wrath: the 'conspiracy theorist.'

Once upon a time, not so long ago, we knew what a 'conspiracy theorist' was. It was somebody who offered up an outsider take - often a very weird one - on an official version of a well-known story. Sometimes the take was convincing (JFK wasn't shot by a lone gunman), sometimes it wasn't (the UN wants to [kill 95% of the world's population](#)), and sometimes it was downright poisonous (the Jews are behind it all.) But we all knew that a 'conspiracy theory' was a story that pointed towards dark, hidden forces operating in the world: a story that said, *something is being hidden, and should be exposed.*

Of course, the phrase was something else, too: a smear. The 'conspiracy theorist' (who probably wore a 'tin foil hat') was basically unhinged: not like us good and sensible people who obtain our information from TV news, peer-reviewed science and books featured in broadsheet newspapers. Still, these people were mostly harmless - and more importantly, they were irrelevant. People who obsess over the Roswell Incident or the faking of the moon landings are no threat to power, so they are ignored by it. In normal times, 'conspiracy theorists' simply don't matter.

But what about the abnormal times? Times like this one, when trust in official sources of authority is cratering, when the narratives are fractured, and when more and more people are grasping in the fog for new maps? In times like this, three things happen. Firstly, a lot of new conspiracy theories proliferate, like flowers in long-dry soil newly opened by rain. Secondly, the phrase 'conspiracy theorist' becomes a useful tool for those trying to hold the official line: a term of dismissal that can be applied to

any and all who question the Narrative, no matter how reasonable their questions might be.

Thirdly, some of those theories will turn out to be right.

It's fair to say that the 'conspiracy theorists' have had a good pandemic. I can still remember a glorious headline from a well-known publication which appeared in early 2020, and hasn't aged well: "Anti-vaxx conspiracy theorists are suggesting that covid-19 will lead to the introduction of 'vaccine passports.'" There have been countless articles like this over the last eighteen months in numerous outlets, dismissing predictions of everything from passports to mandates to quarantine camps as crazy tinfoil-hattishness. This has only served to underline the craven and unprecedented manner in which much of the legacy media has been behaving, as well as the shredding of their remaining credibility. But that's another story.

Perhaps the most reported-on 'conspiracy theory' of the past year, though, has been that of the 'Great Reset'. In this lurid tale - so we are told by those same media outlets - globalist evil genius Klaus Schwab, who lives under a volcano in Davos, plans to kill off 95% of the population (again), and take control of the world's resources. The 5% of us who remain will own nothing but be happy, because there is no longer any climate change and we are all fully vaccinated and boosted and entirely onboard with whatever Klaus and Bill Gates have planned for us next, which will probably involve robots.

It's true that there are various, shall we say, creative tales doing the rounds about Schwab and the agenda of his World Economic Forum (WEF). But the Great Reset itself is no invention of the paranoid, and neither is it a conspiracy. You could call it a plan, or an agenda, but it is best understood as another story: one that Schwab and his colleagues would like us all to adopt as our map for the coming territory. If you want to understand the simultaneously boring and sinister nature of this story, you don't need to penetrate the deepest recesses of the mountain redoubt in which it was secretly hatched: you can just watch the online lectures, attend the virtual conferences, or browse the [relevant section](#) of the WEF's website. Or, if you're really keen, you can do what I did last week, and read Klaus Schwab's book on the subject.

Covid-19: The Great Reset is disappointingly free of mind control devices, microchips-in-vaccines and reptilian overlords. It is, in fact, almost entirely free of anything interesting at all. It is a standard-issue globalist manifesto, of the kind that could have been put out by any editorial functionary at the WEF, WTO, G8, UN, World Bank or IMF, or any writer for the *Economist* or *Forbes*, in any year after 1990. When I was writing my first book, [One No, Many Yeses](#), back in the early 2000s, I read dozens of books and papers like this, in an attempt to understand what drove the promoters of economic and cultural globalisation. They were - and are - always the same: a hymn to the saving grace of global capitalism, dressed up in social justice clichés and aspirational NGO-speak. Diversity, vibrancy, equality, inclusivity, poverty alleviation, motherhood, apple pie: since they first started falling victim to mobs of activists outside their conference centres in the late nineties, the captains of the [Black Ships](#) of global capitalism have been careful to disguise their piratical raids as charity projects, powered by a [Lennonist](#) desire for universal oneness.

Schwab's book, then, has to be read on two levels. On the surface, his argument is bland, unsurprising and deliberately hard to disagree with. He says that the pandemic has changed everything, and that the world will never return to what it was. He also argues that 'what it was' wasn't working in any case. The global economy (the one he helped to build) is changing the climate, causing inequalities in and between nations and giving rise to other contemporary bad things, from racism to ocean pollution. We should thus 'seize the opportunity' that the virus has conveniently brought about to 'reset' the world: to rebuild it in a fairer, better, and more sustainable shape.

So far, so agreeable. Who could object to less poverty and cleaner seas? You have to dig below the surface to understand what any of this actually entails - and, more to the point, how it is to be achieved. And you don't have to dig very far to see the story beneath the story.

The covid event, explains Schwab, has shown that 'we live in a world in which no-one is really in charge.' For plenty of us, this might sound like a good thing, but for globalist thinkers like Schwab it is a problem to be solved. 'There cannot be a lasting recovery without a global strategic framework of governance', he writes. Nation states and their kindly allies in the 'global business community' must unite to 'build back better' (you

may have heard this somewhere before). What does this mean? It means that there is no going back.

Schwab is clear that the measures taken to tackle covid - lockdowns, vaccine passports and mandates, medical segregation, mass sackings, widespread destruction of small businesses, the deepening of the profit and reach of Big Tech, and a radical normalisation of digital monitoring, surveillance and state control - have wrought permanent changes on our societies which will not be going away. 'What was until recently unthinkable', he writes, 'suddenly became possible'. This is especially true when we look at the real winner of the covid years: the technological system itself.

While 'some of the old habits will certainly return' after the pandemic ends, writes Schwab, 'many of the tech behaviours that we were forced to adopt during confinement will through familiarity become more natural.' Home working, digital monitoring of employees by their companies, Zoom meetings and e-deliveries, not to mention the whole structure of the QR-coded 'vaccine passport' system: much of this is likely to remain in the new normal that covid has created. In the reset future, we will reconsider things which once would have been second-nature: things like spending time with our loved ones. Why, asks Schwab, would we endure 'driving to a distant family gathering for the weekend' when 'the WhatsApp family group' (though admittedly 'not as fun') is nevertheless 'safer, cheaper and greener'? Why indeed?

This is the essence of the Great Reset: the construction of a future which is at once controlled and catatonic, dystopian and dull, monitored and monotonous beyond bearing. A future in which global corporations are free to build the world they have long desired: a borderless, interconnected market technocracy, in which each human individual is a tracked, traced and monitored production and consumption machine - all in the name of public health and safety.

Interestingly, Schwab openly observes, in a claim which might land anyone else a Youtube ban, that covid is 'one of the least deadly pandemics the world has experienced over the last 2000 years' and that 'the consequences ... in terms of health and mortality will be mild.' The really lasting consequences, he writes, will not be wrought by the virus itself, but by the response to it. This culminates in the only striking image

in the book, which Schwab uses to illustrate how the fear of sickness will linger long after any threat of covid itself has receded, and what this might lead to:

A new obsession with cleanliness will particularly entail the creation of new forms of packaging. We will be encouraged not to touch the products we buy. Simple pleasures like smelling a melon or squeezing a fruit will be frowned upon and may even become a thing of the past.

A smooth, clean, ordered world, free of dangerous melons on little market stalls, free of small businesses and anarchic commercial arrangements and awkward human interactions of any sort - a world run by efficient, clean, digitised corporations offering 'e-solutions' for any activity that might threaten our safety and wellbeing: this has been on offer for years now, but the pandemic - as Schwab openly acknowledges - has been a blessing for those behind it. We are prepared to accept things now which would have been inconceivable three years ago. What will be conceived next year? And who will listen to the ragtag mob of conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, fascists and nutters who want us to say no to it?

This is the sort of thing that fuels the genuinely weird 'conspiracy theories' around Schwab and his agenda. But it's not necessary to believe that the virus was deliberately released or doesn't exist, to simply observe the wider picture. For decades now, nation states and their political leaders have been progressively disempowered by globalisation, and power has been concentrated in the hands of those who create and control the world's technological infrastructure. Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Klaus Schwab, Jeff Bezos, Sergey Brin, Ray Kurzweil and the like have been moulding our reality for decades, and the [limbic capitalism](#) they pioneered has been hyper-charged by covid - as has awareness of it, and a growing counter-reaction.

We are living through a time in which the conflict between technocracy and democracy has spilled out into the open: the battle is being fought daily now on street and screen. Schwab has caught the spotlight because he is publicly attempting to put a storytelling framework around this conflict. Only last month, at a conference in (where else?) Dubai, he made this ambition explicit by rebranding his Great Reset as the 'Great Narrative'. The world needed a new global story to unite it, he [said](#). He

and the WEF would help to ‘imagine the future, design the future, and then execute the future.’

Klaus Schwab planning to ‘execute the future’ is exactly the kind of thing that gets Alex Jones salivating. But though Schwab and the WEF’s power and influence should not be underplayed, he is not pulling the strings. There are no strings: there is only the Machine, and its direction of travel is long-set. Covid has provided the perfect testing ground and launchpad for a next generation of digital surveillance-and-control technologies which have been on the drawing board for years. The confusion, anger and division swirling around us all right now is a result of our confused inability to navigate the techno-coup we are living through, or even to quite understand what is happening.

But the future is off the drawing board now. Take those QR-enabled vaccine passports, which have been rolled out so rapidly all over the world over the last twelve months. They make [little sense](#) from a ‘public health’ perspective, since we know that the currently available vaccines don’t prevent transmission of the virus. But they do have the effect of normalising the technologies involved: technologies which were in the pipeline anyway. Digital vaccine passports have been in preparation in the European Union, for instance, since [at 2018](#). In [late 2019](#), months before the pandemic began, trials of ‘digital identity systems’ linked to vaccination status began in Bangladesh. It was hoped that they would demonstrate how to ‘leverage immunization as an opportunity to establish digital identity’ [on a worldwide scale](#).

Again: no outlandish claims are required to make sense of this. It is simply an acceleration of the existing direction of travel. Most of us already carry around in our pockets a portable tracking device, which monitors our geographical location, harvests data on everything from our political views to our shopping preferences, and can be used by the State *in extremis* to determine who our friends and contacts are. It’s called a smartphone. As covid becomes endemic over the next year or two, and as new variants keep popping up, there will likely be [continuing pressure](#) for permanent guarantees of health and safety. Handily, we may be able to use those smartphones, already apped-up with our covid QR codes, as permanent ‘[health passports](#)’, which will allow us to access goods and services safely and digitally in the dangerous new world - whilst penalising or excluding anyone who refuses to avail of the recommended public health measures.

If this sounds like one of those nutty old conspiracy theories, bear in mind that actual passports - the ones we use to go on holiday - were themselves [introduced as a temporary measure](#) after World War One. The later justification for making them permanent on a global scale was ‘considerations of health or national security’ provoked by the Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918. A century on, the digital version is close to fruition, and the pandemic provides the perfect opportunity for its rollout. The WHO is currently [negotiating](#) with nation states, regional blocs and corporations to agree on the standards for global harmonisation of digital passports:

New tools developed as part of WHO efforts are almost ready. By the end of 2021, the DDCC Gateway (PKI) beta reference software is expected and a Universal Status Checking app beta, using Google Android FHIR SDK and based on the EU DCC ... It is intended to be able to recognize all the health pass QR code formats being used worldwide.

So we will have our permanent, global [health passports](#), and they will then merge with already-existing [digital ID technologies](#) and the rollout of [digital currency](#), to create for us all a personalised [digital identity wallet](#) which will be presented as an optional convenience but will soon enough become a basic requirement for taking part in the life of society, just as smartphones, credit cards and paper passports have.

Once we have accepted the premise that deep and ubiquitous levels of surveillance, monitoring and control are a price worth paying for safety - and we seem to have done that already - then almost anything is possible. South Korea has just [introduced](#) mass facial recognition technologies in order to ‘speed up notifications of potential exposure to COVID-19.’ China famously operates a [social credit system](#) through which citizens are rewarded or penalised for their behaviour in multiple spheres. Media outlets are producing slick little films detailing how your covid passport could be conveniently [stored on a microchip embedded in your skin](#). In the US, the FDA has already [approved](#) pills implanted with ‘digital ingestion tracking systems’, which send a signal to a smartphone when the medicine is taken. Perhaps you will be able to pay for them with your [biometric cash card](#), imprinted with your fingerprint data.

Buckle up: these are the coming times, and they are herding us directly and deliberately towards the main target: the [‘Internet of Bodies’](#), in which we begin to merge, finally, with the machines we have made. Microchip brain implants - ‘human enhancements’ which will allow us to ‘interface’ directly with the web - will be [with us sooner than we think](#): their development is currently being funded by, among others, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg. The Royal Society, Britain’s premier league scientific thinktank, [can’t contain its excitement](#) about the possibilities they will offer:

Linking human brains to computers using the power of artificial intelligence could enable people to merge the decision-making capacity and emotional intelligence of humans with the big data processing power of computers, creating a new and collaborative form of intelligence. People could become telepathic to some degree, able to converse not only without speaking but without words—through access to each others’ thoughts at a conceptual level. Not only thoughts, but experiences, could be communicated from brain to brain ...

In this story - the story of the Machine - the whole world, and everyone and everything in it, becomes a node in the glowing web that will make and direct our every waking hour. This future has, of course, been long anticipated. William Morris saw it coming, and so did William Blake. Aldous Huxley and [E. M. Forster](#) had its number a century ago, and Edward Abbey predicted it before I was born:

Call it the Anthill State, the Beehive Society, a technocratic despotism — perhaps benevolent, perhaps not, but in either case the enemy of personal liberty, family independence, and community sovereignty, shutting off for a long time to come the freedom to choose among alternate ways of living. The domination of nature made possible by misapplied science leads to the domination of people; to a dreary and totalitarian uniformity.

Covid has both accelerated and justified our dive into the digital anthill, and in coming years it will become more and more relentless. Perhaps many, even most, of us will welcome it. After all, it has been advertised at us for years, in the most deliberate, manipulative mass assault on our wills in human history. We have been trained to love - or at least accept - our smartphones, satnavs, Smart fridges, drones and Alexas. Luddites like me

have always been a fringe sect. Certainly the people selected by the WEF as ‘young global leaders’ of tomorrow are [excited](#) by the future that they are being groomed to build:

When AI and robots took over so much of our work, we suddenly had time to eat well, sleep well and spend time with other people. The concept of rush hour makes no sense anymore, since the work that we do can be done at any time. I don't really know if I would call it work anymore. It is more like thinking-time, creation-time and development-time.

Although, of course, every society has its downsides:

Once in a while I get annoyed about the fact that I have no real privacy. Nowhere I can go and not be registered. I know that, somewhere, everything I do, think and dream of is recorded. I just hope that nobody will use it against me.

This is not satire; this is prophecy. Or maybe it's just marketing. Whichever it is, we have come at long last to the foothills of the future: an inverted version of *The Matrix* in which [Agent Smith](#) is the hero. A world both terrible and boring at the same time. As climate change bites, ecosystems continue to degrade, supply chains jam up, the social fabric frays, and mass urbanisation and mass migrations accelerate, it will become more and more necessary to micromanage, nudge and control the citizens of our mass societies just to keep the growth-&-progress show on the road. The pandemic has shown us how this can be achieved. Schwab is right that there is no turning back from the lessons it has taught.

Sometimes I think that what is happening now has no precedent in human history. At other times, it seems like human history as usual, only faster. When did we start augmenting ourselves, after all? When we invented glasses, shoes, armour, chipped flint? If this is what humans do, and what we are - animals who invent ourselves stronger, think worlds into being and then try to build them - is there any way to halt the march towards the merger of man and machine? Or did that already happen?

I could go on, but I want to end by saying something else: something I may not have expected to say at the beginning. But then that first essay,

from a month ago, already seems like it was written in another time, so fast is everything shifting.

Here's the thing: for some reason, despite all I have written about in this little trilogy, despite the coming winter, despite the new partial lockdown that my vaxxed-and-passported country has just entered, despite everything that the future seems to hold: despite it all, I feel some strange glimmer of hope. *Control*: this is the story that the Machine tells about itself. The construction of a giant system of control and management, to save us all forever from sickness, death and inefficiency: this is the endgame of our global anti-culture, and covid has supercharged its direction of travel. But control systems never last. The world is beyond both our understanding and our control, and so, in the end, are people. We barely understand ourselves. Perhaps Klaus Schwab's desire to 'improve the world' is real: but he will still never be able to grip it tightly enough to bend it to his will. Who can?

The world is not a mechanism: it is a mystery, one that we participate in daily. When we try to redesign it like a global CEO, or explain it like an essayist, we are going to fail: weakly or gloriously, but fail we shall. The Machine, the technium, the metaverse: whatever we name our 21st century Babel, and however overwhelming it seems to us in the moment, it can never conquer in the end, because it is a manifestation of human will and not the will of God. If you don't believe in the will of God, call it the law of nature instead: either way, it speaks the same thing to us. It says, gently or firmly: *you are not in charge*.

I can't pretend to understand all of this. All I have is my intuition, and these words. But I think that the world is more surprising, and more alive, than I sometimes see or even want to believe. I think that the corona moment highlights an ancient ongoing struggle, between the spirit of the wild and the spirit of the Machine, and that this struggle goes on around us and inside us all every minute of the day.

Sometimes, battles must be fought, stands taken, lines drawn. This is one of those times. Once we begin to understand all the stories at play, we can begin to see which one we are taking part in, and what choices we must make: what we stand for, and what we will not. If we refuse the future that is being laid out before us - if we refuse the Machine - we do not have the choice, at this moment in history, to sit in silence.

The times demand now that we remember and cultivate some of the old virtues. We could start with courage: courage and patience. It may take years, decades, centuries, but the Machine we have built to manage life itself, to squeeze the world into our own small shape - it will come down in the end, and the humming wires will fall silent. Our task in the meantime is to understand, so that we can resist, the shape of the tyranny it brings.

But D. H. Lawrence knew: all the prophets knew. The Earth cannot be reset. Not by us; not ever.

*They talk of the triumph of the machine,
but the machine will never triumph.
Out of the thousands and thousands of centuries of man
the unrolling of ferns, white tongues of the acanthus lapping at the sun,
for one sad century
machines have triumphed, rolled us hither and thither,
shaking the lark's nest till the eggs have broken.
Shaken the marshes, till the geese have gone
and the wild swans flown away singing the swan-song at us.
Hard, hard on the earth the machines are rolling,
but through some hearts they will never roll.*