A 'Good Citizen' for pandemic times

Michaela Benson

Since 23rd March 2020, the UK has been in lockdown; international mobility almost entirely restricted, everyday mobilities limited and (self-)monitored. My lockdown narrative presents me as a 'Good Citizen', fulfilling with relative ease the enhanced obligations that underpin the government's lockdown measures. Undoubtedly, a range of embodied, material and socio-economic conditions mean I am well-positioned to meet these obligations: my partner and I are salaried workers who can fulfil their work obligations from home; we are in good physical and mental health; we live in spacious accommodation with private outdoor space; and we are also fortunate to have access to open space for exercise and to live in easy distance of supermarkets.

But what of those who do not—or perhaps, more accurately, cannot—comply? In what follows, I reflect on how emerging understandings of lockdown would benefit from the consideration of how these measures, their enforcement and their consequences are caught up in the politics of citizenship in Britain.

Those best placed to adapt to the UK's public health response to COVID-19 are others like me, those for whom the necessary change in behaviour and actions—at least for now—have relatively limited material consequence for their lives. This public health response foregrounds an understanding of what Bridget Anderson, in her book ***Us and Them*** describes as the 'Good Citizen … the liberal sovereign self: rational, self-owning, and independent, with a moral compass that enables him to consider the interests of others' (2013: 3).

The virus' embrace has led to the production of a new formulation: what I refer to here as the 'Good Citizen' for pandemic times. Members of the public are handed the responsibility for slowing the spread of the virus, expected to meet these obligations by washing their hands, staying at home, not congregating or meeting with people outside their households, maintaining 2m distance when out in public, not stockpiling. Importantly, these are judged as reasonable actions in these unprecedented circumstances. By complying, we take responsibility not only for our health and wellbeing, but for those more vulnerable (to the virus) than us.

In contrast, those who do not comply are cast as reckless, on face value, their actions signalling a blatant disregard of these obligations and their failure to share the values of the wider community. It is just a short step from this to them being cast as without value within this community. Indeed, as scholarship by **Bridget Anderson, Imogen Tyler, Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy** makes starkly visible the 'Good Citizen' does not stand alone. It gains its significance from a broader system of classification that excludes the 'non-

citizen' (e.g. the migrant, the racialised other), and that denies access to the rights of citizenship for those judged to have failed to meet their responsibilities as citizens (e.g. the undeserving poor).

Such scholarship points to the uneven stakes within belonging. Such processes of classification mean that some experience what **Les Back** refers to as 'the homely privilege of automatic belonging' (2009: 207), while others find themselves placed others under scrutiny and judged for whether they are deserving of access to the rights of citizenship. Against this background, recognising how the public health response reproduces this politics of citizenship is important, particularly when questions of compliance with the lockdown are framed in terms of morality.

Uneven stakes in the lockdown

While it is clear that physical distancing is important in gaining some control over the spread of the virus, there are those who do not have privileges, resources and material circumstances to meet these obligations. When we turn our attention to who this might include, it becomes clear how unevenly positioned people are to comply with the lockdown. While by no means a comprehensive list, this includes those whose lives have already been ravaged by austerity measures; those who cannot plausibly work from home, for whom lockdown may mean no work and no income; those living in cramped and overcrowded conditions with limited access to outdoor space; others who lack the safe and secure home environments that makes complying with these restrictions possible.

Around the world there are those who do not have access to the clean water and soap that have become so crucial in preventing infection and contagion. This should leave us in no doubt that the pandemic has and will interplay with existing social divisions and inequalities at global, national or local levels. Those ill-placed to stay at home and self-preserve, because of their working and living conditions, their material circumstances, and their socio-economic status (before and in consequence of lockdown) most likely to be its casualties, succumbing not only to the virus but also on the frontline of related social and economic impacts as these unfold through and beyond the pandemic. As such, our attention should remain on the different stakes at play in pandemic times.

Within the context of a politics of citizenship that sorts the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving', the lockdown risks stigmatising those whose embodied, material and socio-economic circumstances make it less viable for them to meet the obligations of a 'Good Citizen' for pandemic times. Not meeting their end of the bargain vis-a-vis the relationship to the state and society, they find themselves recast as the 'failed citizens' of pandemic times, their actions translating into social and moral judgements in the hands of others better fit to meet these requirements. Those not complying will find themselves shouldering the blame for the continued spread of the virus through the population, the ever-increasing death rate, any prolongation of the lockdown and indeed, any further restrictions on movement outside the home.

We can already see these social judgements playing out in the public realm. For example, the UK's continuous COVID news cycle repeatedly draws attention to those behaving irresponsibly; Matt Hancock MP, the UK's Health Secretary warned if, '**too many people go out and flout the other rules then I'm afraid we will have to take action**'. Common tropes focus on

the presence, proximity, congregation and movement of bodies in public spaces, whether parks, beaches, or town centres.

The emergency measures introduced by the UK Government through **their Coronavirus Bill** give the Police and Immigration Authorities the 'authority to enforce these measures', to make those judged as non-compliant meet their obligations or be punished accordingly. Police chiefs have been making clear their intention to enforce the lockdown measures, and several forces across the UK have set up online forms where members of the public can report breaches of the COVID-19 restrictions.

I am in no doubt about what the fallout from this will be: those for whom meeting the restrictions is unviable, those populations and individuals who are already under greater surveillance and scrutiny by the state. The marginal, the disadvantaged, the racialised and migrant others within the state are more likely have sanctions imposed in these times. Undoubtedly, the business of and reach of the surveillance state and the hostile environment—two sides of the same coin—will continue much as before, bolstered by these emergency powers.

Delegating responsibility to the public through the reporting of breaches is entirely in line with the ways in which the UK Home Office has previously co-opted the public in surveillance and control: from anti-terrorism campaigns calling for people to report 'unusual behaviour' on public transport, to Project Kraken's focus on engaging the public in identifying potential 'border crime', as well as making landlords, medical professionals, and university lecturers (among others) de facto border agents, responsible for checking the immigration status of tenants, patients and students.

Lockdown and the politics of citizenship

Understanding lockdown through a focus on the politics of citizenship means asking questions about how and for whom judgements about compliance with the lockdown become the grounds for enforcement and detention by police and immigration authorities, reporting by friends, neighbours and members of the general public. It makes visible the likely discriminatory outcomes of such enforcement and highlights how these are located in longer histories of policing, surveillance and bordering that shore up moral and social boundaries of belonging in contemporary Britain.

Despite the undeniable public health crisis that COVID-19 signals worldwide, we need to be alert to the way in which governments mobilise COVID-19 and their response as a way of perpetuating punitive practices that allocates access to state resource on the basis of classificatory logics that distinguish between the citizen and the migrant, between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' citizen. It begs the question: how long before these social and moral judgements become the grounds for evaluating whether individuals deserve access to welfare and healthcare?

Michaela Benson is Reader in Sociology at Goldsmiths, and works on questions of citizenship, migration and belonging. She tweets @michaelacbenson.