

## Book Review

### Behavioural Psychology, Fear and Covid-19

**Laura Dodsworth, *A State of Fear: How the UK Government Weaponised Fear during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Pinter & Martin, London, 2021, 320 pp, ISBN 978-1-78066-720-1, price £9.99, index.**

Reviewed by **Richard Brinton**

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.  
Marie Curie

Fear is a well-known tool, used by leaders down the ages and of all descriptions to help effect certain desired ends, whether they be heads of states in war time, or tyrants and dictators at pretty much any time. The tactics use propaganda to enhance the feeling of threat, distorting and filtering news to present a desired picture which is often very misleading, or even plain false. An example of this was the war-mongering in the UK around the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ before and during the Iraq War in the early 2000s. The threat, portrayed continually as ready to strike at us at any time here in England, turned out to be a known falsehood presented by our political leaders, but it helped shift public opinion in the UK and USA to back going to war.

I had the feeling of *déjà vu* when reading Laura Dodsworth’s recently published book under review here, *A State of Fear*. Here again were overwhelming descriptions and ample evidence of governments during the Corona crisis using propaganda, fear and other related tactics to strengthen their control and to elicit desired ends.

‘Fear is the foundation of most governments’, John Adams, the Founding Father and second President of the United States, once said, which should give us food for thought.

#### **The Truth Will Out!**

The story had already started leaking out by the end of 2020, and in January 2021, 47 psychologists wrote to the British Psychological Society saying the covert strategies being used by the government to keep people in a heightened state of fear for effecting compliance was ‘morally questionable.’<sup>1</sup> Reference was made to SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) minutes of 22 March 2020, which stated: ‘The perceived level of threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent’ by ‘using hard-hitting emotional messaging’. The government vehemently denied such tactics at the time, but it will be hard denying the weight of evidence given in *A State of Fear*. In a well-written, easily readable format, it is a real page-turner – because so many things she describes have direct relevance to much that we have personally experienced over the past year or so.

Dodsworth describes a huge machinery within and around government not simply for deciding policies, but for what can only be described as the formulation and strategy of hard-hitting propaganda, including countering critical or opposing views. In an Ofcom letter to all broadcasters on 27 March 2020,<sup>2</sup> it lays out ‘Ofcom’s approach to *enforcing* content on the Coronavirus’ (my emphasis). It is what amounts to media censorship – the first time to my knowledge so effectively used during peacetime. Its guidance is enforceable through the ‘imposition of statutory sanctions’, and pertains to ‘inaccurate or materially misleading content in programmes’ (who decides this?); and ‘medical or other advice which may be harmful if followed *or discourages the audience from following official rules and guidance*’ (my emphasis). In other words, only official rules and guidance are allowed in the media. No open discussion. No debates.

It is puzzling that there hasn’t been more of an uproar on the Ofcom dictates alone, which Dodsworth points to. In part, this is because people just don’t know of it. During the Iraq War there were also reporting restrictions, and I remember some newspapers explicitly reminding readers of this. There have been no such ‘reminders’ this time around, perhaps because the idea of having such during peacetime is so shocking. Quite likely the government has consequently discouraged publicity on it.

## The Methodology of Behavioural Control

What is new in the government methods being used this time around is the extent to which behavioural psychology is being used – and in particular, fear. Dodsworth describes the subliminal behavioural methods in detail, through interviews with behavioural scientists, psychologists and doctors as well as some on the government groups willing to engage in conversation (anonymously, of course).

‘The use of behavioural psychology has become more formalised and deeply embedded in government’, Dodsworth relates, described in the chapter ‘The tools of the trade’. Ever heard of EAST, or MINDSPACE? They are acronyms for their methodology. A primary tactic used is what Dodsworth describes as a ‘Blitzkrieg of daily fear bombs’ in the media, on placards in the streets, in stores – everywhere. Examples include:

- **Daily headlines of new cases and new deaths from Covid.** Do we ever hear alongside this how many die of other causes? As if that’s not enough, the government comes up with models to predict ever more deaths – most proven to be completely off track, bearing no relation to reality.
- **Continual emotive pictures** showing frightened, dying or dead people. Many of these have been shown to be manipulations, of which Dodsworth gives many examples.
- **Emotive personalised messages** – ‘don’t kill granny!’ – ‘people will die’ – ‘don’t bring Covid home this Christmas’ – ‘if you bend the rule, people will die’ – ‘don’t let a coffee cost lives’.... Some visceral and frightening adverts were withdrawn after complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) as the claims ‘were misleading and could not be substantiated’, or breached ASA standards.
- **Continual scares of new deadly variants** – the Italian, the Brazilian, the Kentish, the Indian, the Nepal variant.... Each is claimed to present a great threat, and when each fizzles out, a new one takes the headlines. Viruses, Dodsworth notes, always mutate; there will always be new variants. Reacting with glaring headlines each time – will this be providing continuing cause for legislative extensions of emergency powers and continual vaccinations?<sup>3</sup>

With scientific studies, whether on Covid threats or vaccine efficacy, the question unfortunately needs factoring in: who funds the research?<sup>4</sup> Dodsworth gives an example of a leaked German government paper which describes how scientists were hired by the government to produce a worst-case scenario in order to justify restrictions, including showing ‘images of people choking to death at home...’. Contrary to claims made by the politicians, the government was not following science, but dictating it.<sup>5</sup>

How is it that their methods have been so effective? The psychology used works sub-consciously, with subliminal and fear-inducing messages bypassing the thinking part of the brain. It truly becomes a *1984*-like scenario, where we are ‘looked after’ by the state – not questioning, just following – fearful of doing anything else, but ‘happy’ within our confined quarters of our (unbeknownst to us) experimental cage. A groupthink mentality is encouraged, with any dissenters looked on with suspicion if not condemnation, experienced even by professionals in their fields. This was part of the dystopia described in George Orwell’s novel *1984*. Are we currently writing the sequel?

In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of *A State of Fear*, ‘The business of fear and the unelected psychocrats’, Dodsworth describes the various groups involved in the UK government ‘campaign’, including the Behaviour Insights Team (BIT) started already under David Cameron in 2010, unofficially called ‘the Nudge Unit’, now teaching governments around the world how to ‘nudge’ citizens.

Other groups she discusses are SAGE, the most widely known; SPI-B (the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviour), the group most entrusted with advising on how to ‘encourage’ (more accurately, ‘coerce’) the public to adhering to the law and guidance; The 77<sup>th</sup> Brigade, linked with the Army, and the Rapid Response Unit – both, according to Dodsworth’s research, involved with countering

media and social media claims that are contrary to government guidance.

## Many Areas of Contradictions

Dodsworth gives many examples where there are confusing and contradictory messages and actions. For all of these, please see the book for more detail – it has an excellent index to aid finding specific material. In the policies involving *face masks, PCR tests, and lockdowns*, Dodsworth notes how, in spite of insufficient scientific evidence to support the positions taken, they were ‘used’ by the behavioural scientists for encouraging the feeling of solidarity, security and for creating ‘signals’: for instance, the face mask was a visible indicator that there is danger present.<sup>6</sup> Lockdowns, Dodsworth notes, were never agreed upon, both in pandemic planning in the UK and in World Health Organisation guidance, as being effective.<sup>7</sup> Yet they were used repeatedly around the world for whole populations, with disastrous effects seemingly ignored. People who criticised any of these measures were labelled ‘covidiot’ or ‘covid deniers’.

And *vaccinations*? Dodsworth is neither for nor against them per se, but very much against coercive methods being used to pressure citizens into having the jab. A National Health Service message, for example, stated that, ‘normality can only return for you and others with your vaccination’; and a German slogan said, ‘Impfen = Freiheit’ (vaccination = freedom). Dodsworth quotes retired clinical psychologist Gary Sidley, saying that such psychological pressure ‘fits the definition of blackmail’.

There are some areas which Dodsworth doesn’t go into which are still of great concern and related very much to the Covid narrative. For example, although the book is about fear, little is said on the significant negative effect fear has on our human immune system and on health, making us much more vulnerable to illness. It is a huge irony that fear tactics are used by the

government during an epidemic.<sup>8</sup> Health factors are given very little attention by the government.

In the concluding chapters, Dodsworth asks, is this coercive behavioural method of controlling the population what we want? Is it ethical? She quotes Big Brother Watch: ‘This is how autocracies and dictatorships emerge, for the “greater good”, measure by measure.’ The author outlines her steps in Chapter 19 for ‘making sure it never happens again’. She acknowledges that fear in society needs to also be seen in a greater context, quoting from Frank Furedi, a sociologist and long-time researcher into and writer on fear, on the increase of fear in our times. Charles Eisenstein, in his essay *The Coronation*<sup>9</sup> from March 2020, noted how the fear of death had been raised several notches by the government and media, treating it almost as an unnatural phenomenon. Humanity was becoming out-of-touch with the greater cycles and realities of life.

Ethics is a consideration that has been totally left out of the behavioural psychologists’ methods, and Dodsworth warns of the potential dystopia which could arise as a result. There is danger, she says, of ‘muscle memory’ for the government, making future restrictions easier unless we voice our objections.

Dodsworth quotes Conservative government minister Michael Gove, thus: ‘Once powers are yielded to the state at moments of crisis or emergency, it’s very rarely the case that the state hands them back.’ ‘It is the duty of all of us’, Dodsworth concludes, ‘to think about what type of society we want to live in.’ Through the weaponisation of fear, she notes, the current government ‘has given up on trust and transparency’.

We have entered an extremely materialistic period in which human beings are reduced to dots on graphs, models used which bear little connection to reality, where we are animate computers waiting to be programmed – by the behaviourists! B.F. Skinner’s famous book title

comes to mind, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. The significance of soul and spiritual life is totally left out of the equation. It is something that Dodsworth does not discuss, yet I believe is a significant factor for ‘getting us into this mess’.

Dodsworth exhorts us to stand up and voice the values we *want* to have – a part of our action plan for tomorrow! For today, I highly recommend reading this book.

## Notes

- 1 This received scant media attention. It was reported on in Express online, however: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1388315/coronavirus-fear-tactics-psychology-british-public>, ‘Government accused of using Covid fear tactics to inflate anxiety levels of British public’, 24 January 2021 (accessed 9 August 2021).
- 2 See [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/205713/annex-a-important-guidance-broadcast-content-on-coronavirus,-27-march-2020.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/205713/annex-a-important-guidance-broadcast-content-on-coronavirus,-27-march-2020.pdf), Letter to Broadcasters: ‘Important guidance – broadcast content on the Coronavirus’, 27 March 2020 (accessed 9 August 2021).
- 3 Many governments have granted the pharmaceuticals permission to come up with vaccines for new variants without additional testing.
- 4 An independent study compared research results given to independent groups with those given to groups funded by companies with a financial interest. There was an astonishing difference in the outcomes. See the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/research-transparency-needed>, ‘Systematic assessment of research on autism spectrum disorder and mercury reveals conflicts of interest and the need for transparency in autism research’, October 2015 (accessed 9 August 2021). See also <https://tinyurl.com/biases-coronavirus-mortality>, ‘Public health lessons learned from biases in coronavirus mortality overestimation’, 12 August 2020 (accessed 9 August 2021).

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- 5 Reported in *Welt am Sonntag*. See p. 66 in *A State of Fear*. Link: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus225868061/Corona-Politik-Wie-das-Innenministerium-Wissenschaftler-einspannte.html> (accessed 9 August 2021).
- 6 See *A State of Fear*, p. 112 in the chapter, 'Tools of the trade'.
- 7 See Appendix 2 in Dodsworth's book, 'Lockdowns don't work', for a full consideration.
- 8 These factors are described in further detail in Dr Thomas Hardtmuth's book, *What Covid-19 Can Teach Us: Meeting the Virus with Fear or Informed Common Sense?*, InterActions, Stroud, 2021.
- 9 See <https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/the-coronation/>, 'The coronation', March 2020 (accessed 9 August 2021).

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