**LOCKED DOWN LEISURE IN BRITAIN**

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**Abstract**

This paper explains how the spread of Covid-19 in early-2020 led to containment measures throughout Europe, including a legally enforced lockdown in the UK from March 23 which closed most out-of-home leisure provisions. Time use evidence is then used to show how lockdown led to an abrupt, unprecedented in scale, increase in residual ‘leisure’ time, and how this was distributed and used among males and females, in different age groups. The immediate lessons for leisure studies have been to endorse claims that leisure activities promote well-being, that loss of social connections at work and leisure weaken macro-solidarity, and the importance of leisure provisions in modern economies. Experiences during lockdown, and difficulties in exiting, then clarify exactly which leisure matters most, for whom, and why.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, leisure, leisure industries, lockdown.

**INTRODUCTION**

On December 1 2019 in Wuhan, a city in central China, patient zero was identified infected with an unknown type of corona virus, subsequently called Covid-19. On December 16 the first Covid-19 patient was admitted to hospital in Wuhan. On December 31 China officially informed the World Health Organisation that it had identified a new type of corona virus. The first recorded Covid-19 death was in Wuhan on January 9 2020. By then the infection was spreading rapidly in Wuhan and the city was quarantined on January 23. By February 5 the city had 100,000 confirmed cases and global media carried images of a city in lockdown (the term subsequently used), and the hasty construction of two new hospitals in Wuhan, each with 1000 beds.

On January 10 China recorded its first Covid-19 case outside Wuhan. By then the infection had spread to other countries in East Asia, and on January 31 the World Health Organisation announced a global emergency (pandemic). By then Covid-19 had entered Europe. The first case was identified in France on January 24, in Germany on January 27 and in the UK on January 31. Before long Britain was receiving airlifts of citizens who had been stranded in Wuhan, from the Diamond Princess, a cruise ship marooned off Yokohama with Covid-19 cases on board, then from other parts of the world. However, on February 29 the UK had just three confirmed cases. The first Covid-19 death in Britain was on March 5. Few realised at that time that the country was just 18 days away from lockdown.

During the first days of March there was an outbreak of Covid-19 cases in Lodi, a city in northern Italy. There were media images of Lodi’s hospital overwhelmed by admissions. Lodi itself and other cities in northern Italy went into lockdown, and travel restrictions were imposed between the north and other parts of Italy. Throughout Europe, country-after-country went into lockdown, borders between countries were closed and travel restrictions between regions were introduced in larger countries.

In the UK spectator sports were suspended on March 16 and the government advised the public to stay away from crowded places such as pubs and restaurants, which lost most customers almost immediately. On March 17 the government announced a job retention (furlough) scheme under which the state would pay up to 80 percent of the salaries of laid-off staff up to a maximum of £2.5K per month. On March 20 nurseries, schools and pubs were ordered to close and on March 23 these measures were enforced and extended by legislation. All non-essential retail was obliged to close, Just food, medicine and hardware shops could stay open. The public was instructed to stay at home except for one daily period of exercise and for essential shopping. Otherwise people were allowed to leave home only for non-essential work that could not be done at home, and if two-metres distance between staff could be observed in workplaces. This requirement could be relaxed if necessary in places of essential work such as hospitals. People could meet with just one member of a second household. This had to be outside their dwellings, and while maintaining two metres distance from the non-household member. The UK slid into lockdown alongside the rest of Europe. The main difference was that the UK suspended tracing, testing and isolating infected contacts of confirmed cases on March 12 due to lack of capacity. This is the most plausible explanation of the UK beginning its exit from lockdown on May 28 with highest Covid-19 linked death toll in Europe and the highest death rate per capita.

However, this paper is not an assessment of the UK’s preparedness for a pandemic, or of government actions preceding, during or at the exit from lockdown. What happened created a natural experiment in which nearly all out-of-home leisure suddenly became inaccessible. The next section overviews what happened to leisure time and activities in Britain between March 23 and May 28 2020. This is followed by lessons for leisure studies which are perhaps surprisingly clear and uncontroversial, and should have global relevance. The conclusion is about the exit from lockdown in the UK, and the ‘other side’ options for leisure and the rest of people’s lives that Britain and every other European country and North America could then debate.

**LEISURE UNDER LOCKDOWN**

The evidence is not rich and plentiful. Only online research, usually quantitative, was possible at the time. There were government surveys into how people were spending their time, their physical and mental well-being, and their support for and compliance with official instructions. During the month prior to exit from lockdown being announced, a weekly panel study started to measure levels of infection among a representative sample of (initially) England’s population age two and over (see Office for National Statistics, 2020a, 2020b). There was also consumer research plus evidence published by non-governmental organisations which represented and monitored specific sections of the population and issues.

It takes longer to list activities that were prohibited or inaccessible under lockdown than uses of leisure that remained legal and accessible. The public was instructed to stay at home except for essential shopping and exercise. Hardware and gardening equipment shops, but not garden centres, remained open alongside shops supplying medicines, food and drink, including alcohol. People could go out for exercise and could travel by car to do so, but not far from their homes. They could go out only in the company of other members of the same household. One person could visit a second household, but the meeting had to be outdoors, typically in a garden, and with two metres distance maintained. People could travel to work only if their jobs could not be done at home, and if ‘distancing’ could be maintained in the workplace. The exceptions were for essential work, principally health care and certain public services.

Nurseries and schools were shut except for pupils listed as requiring protection and children of key workers. University teaching and examining went online. Most retail shut alongside all hairdressers, gyms, sports centres and swimming pools. Team games and other competitive sports were prohibited. Sport stadiums were shut, as were heritage sites, galleries, museums, libraries, cinemas, concert halls and theatres alongside civic and community centres. Church services were prohibited except for weddings and funerals with very limited attendances. Pubs, cafes and restaurants closed, and so did public toilets. Public transport could be used only for essential journeys (usually to work) and (in principle) if ‘distancing’ could be maintained. Car passengers had to be from the same household as the driver.

This lockdown closed swaths of the economy. By the end of May 79 percent of businesses had taken advantage of the job retention scheme (Office for National Statistics, 2020c), over eight million were furloughed and two million were on an equivalent scheme for the self-employed. In addition, there had been over two million new claims for Universal Credit (which includes unemployment benefit) (Office for National Statistics, 2020d). Over a third of the UK workforce was not working. This is one way, but not the main way, in which the lockdown increased the free time at people’s disposal.

We know exactly how uses of time were changed by the lockdown. The latest online survey of time use by a nationally representative sample of adults had been conducted in 2014-15. This survey was repeated with a sample aged 18 and over between the end of March and the end of April 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020e). Time use surveys are blunt instruments for measuring most specific uses of leisure. Data from each respondent is collected for just two days, a weekday and a Saturday or a Sunday. Participation surveys are more sensitive instruments for measuring the proportions of people who take part in specific leisure activities. Time use studies are best for measuring trends and differences between socio-demographic groups in time spent on activities and inactivities in which substantial sections of a population are involved for substantial blocks of time on most days. Within its limitations, the time use evidence is ideal for measuring the impact of a major change, in this case lockdown, on how each 24 hours was redistributed between different uses (see Table I).

**Table I**

**Average daily time in minutes, whole population age 18 and over**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2014/2015** | **March/April 2020** |
| Travelling and transport, including walking | 84 | 17 |
| Working not from home | 150 | 98 |
| Working from home | 15 | 55 |
| Study | 14 | 9 |
| Keep fit | 19 | 23 |
| Unpaid childcare | 31 | 35 |
| Gardening and DIY | 16 | 39 |
| Unpaid housework | 147 | 144 |
| Sleep and rest | 533 | 551 |
| Personal care, including eating and drinking | 146 | 133 |
| Entertainment, socialising and other free time (residual category) | 277 | 321 |
| Other | 8 | 15 |

Table I shows that lockdown led to a steep decline in time spent travelling. This would have been a direct response to the government’s instruction to stay at home. Another response to this instruction will be the decline in time spent working away from home. There was a major increase in time spent working at home. Only 12 minutes were trimmed from an average day’s total paid work time whereas 67 minutes were saved from travelling time. There were smaller declines in time spent studying and on personal care, presumably due to people not needing to prepare to go out for work or leisure. As well as time spent working at home, there were sharp increases in time spent on gardening and DIY, and also on leisure which is treated as a residual block of time in this analysis of time use data – almost all time that cannot be accounted for by anything else. Average leisure time increased from 277 to 321 minutes per day. If keep fit, gardening and DIY are included as leisure, the increase was from 312 to 383 minutes per day. This is a substantial increase: more leisure time than had been gained since the 1960s (Gershuny, 2000). There will be more below on the increase in time spent keeping fit. There were relatively small increases in time spent on unpaid child care, presumably due to children being locked out of school, and on sleep and rest. The switch from going to (paid) work to doing the work at home is one of the shifts in time use that commentators have expected to become part of a new post-pandemic normal.

**Table II**

**Average daily time in minutes by sex**

**Males Females**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2014/2015** | **March/April 2020** | **2014/2015** | **March/April 2020** |
| Travelling and transport, including walking | 91 | 18 | 76 | 17 |
| Working not from home | 180 | 121 | 121 | 74 |
| Working from home | 18 | 55 | 11 | 55 |
| Study | 15 | 8 | 13 | 11 |
| Keep fit | 23 | 25 | 15 | 21 |
| Unpaid childcare | 17 | 27 | 45 | 43 |
| Gardening and DIY | 22 | 51 | 10 | 27 |
| Unpaid housework | 105 | 118 | 188 | 170 |
| Sleep and rest | 529 | 548 | 537 | 554 |
| Personal care, including eating and drinking | 140 | 130 | 152 | 136 |
| Entertainment, socialising and other free time (residual category) | 292 | 325 | 263 | 318 |
| Other | 7 | 14 | 9 | 15 |

There were some similarities and some differences, some convergences and some divergences, in how lockdown changed men’s and women’s uses of time (see Table II). Under lockdown, men and women were spending equal amounts of time working at home. Men, but not women, increased the time they spent on childcare, and men increased while women reduced the time they spent on housework. However, in both cases women continued to do more than men. Overall, the sex gap in leisure time per day in favour of men narrowed from 49 to 35 minutes when gardening and DIY, and keep fit are included.

**Table III**

**Average daily time in minutes by age groups**

**39 and under 40-59 60 and over**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2014/2015** | **March/ April 2020** | **2014/2015** | **March/April 2020** | **2014/2015** | **March/April 2020** |
| Travelling and transport, including walking | 91 | 19 | 94 | 18 | 62 | 14 |
| Working not from home | 198 | 127 | 192 | 117 | 38 | 38 |
| Working from home | 14 | 71 | 22 | 71 | 6 | 16 |
| Study | 33 | 16 | 5 | 8 | 1 | 2 |
| Keep fit | 21 | 25 | 16 | 22 | 18 | 23 |
| Unpaid childcare | 49 | 59 | 25 | 37 | 17 | 2 |
| Gardening and DIY | 5 | 21 | 15 | 39 | 30 | 63 |
| Unpaid housework | 109 | 118 | 153 | 153 | 191 | 167 |
| Sleep and rest | 539 | 562 | 520 | 542 | 541 | 548 |
| Personal care, including eating and drinking | 133 | 123 | 135 | 125 | 175 | 156 |
| Entertainment, socialising and other free time (residual category) | 240 | 286 | 257 | 295 | 351 | 397 |
| Other | 7 | 14 | 7 | 14 | 10 | 16 |

As with sex, there were differences and similarities in the impact of lockdown on uses of time in different age groups (see Table III). The over-60s were exempt from major changes except spending less time travelling and on child care, presumably due to the prohibition of acting as carers for grandchildren, and spending more time on gardening and DIY. The decline in study time was entirely in the youngest age group. Under-40 year olds increased the time they devoted to housework while this declined among the over-60s, very likely due to their inability to entertain at home. Time spent on keep fit increased in all age groups (see below).

We can note that the largest blocks of time before and during lockdown were spent sleeping and resting, and on leisure. People had more leisure time, though perhaps this is better labelled as free time because there were fewer ways in which this time could be used. The main uses of this time are given in Table IV. The evidence in this table is consistent with the known tendency for people to continue as before from day-to-day, from week-to-week and from year-to-year in so far as they are able to do so, making adjustments following life events such as leaving education, parenthood and retirement (see Maguire et al, 1987; Mihalik et al, 1989; Reeves, 2014; Scott and Willits, 1989).

**Table IV**

**Average minutes per day spent on specific activities under lockdown**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Watching TV, Blue-ray or DVD | 128 |
| Streaming TV or videos | 45 |
| Reading books, magazines, newspapers | 28 |
| Playing games, computer games | 26 |
| Hobbies and other leisure activities | 16 |

The adjustments that people made during lockdown when most out-of-home leisure became inaccessible can be summarised as increasing the amounts of time spent doing things at home that they had done before. This usually meant more time watching television plus purchased DVDs, augmented by streamed services and electronic games. Average time per day spent online by adults rose from 205 minutes in September 2019 to 242 minutes in April 2020. Young adults, aged 18-24, spent an hour longer online per day throughout compared with older age groups. Lockdown accelerated the development of a vibrant creative industry around user-generated videos (Ofcom, 2020). Netflix was one of the main commercial winners during lockdown. Amazon was another as a longer-term online shift of retail accelerated. People also spent more time reading newspapers, magazines and books, but far less than the time spent watching television, PC, Tablet and smartphone screens.

Keep fit is separated from other uses of leisure time in the Office for National Statistics’ analysis of these recent UK time use surveys. It is treated like personal care and sleep as a form of self-maintenance. The increased time spent keeping fit during lockdown was most likely by those already habituated to regular exercise, a habit usually acquired in early life then continued, sometimes discarded, but rarely taken-up afresh after a long absence (see Birchwood et al, 2008; Roberts et al, 1991, 2020). People’s tendency to engage in physically active recreation appears to have become independent of the facilities that are available. The growth of the gym industry throughout the previous 30 years was alongside static rates of participation in physically active leisure in the UK (see Roberts, 2016). When gyms plus public sport and leisure centres and swimming pools closed, and competitive sport was prohibited, people with additional free time increased their exercise by walking, jogging, running and cycling. When lockdown ended it was unknown whether they would return to their former modes of exercise or shopping.

We know from consumer research that alcohol consumption declined overall during lockdown. However, there were different trends among different groups of drinkers. In different surveys 33 percent and 42 percent reported that they were drinking less, while 16 percent and 21 percent said that they were drinking more frequently, in greater quantities, and these tended to be the heaviest drinkers pre-lockdown (CGA, 2020; Holmes, 2020).

**LESSONS FOR LEISURE STUDIES**

Lockdown was a big leisure event. It led to a sudden increase in leisure time on a scale unprecedented in the modern era. It involved an abrupt shutdown of most out-of-home leisure, again unprecedented even in wartime. There were likely, and we shall see that indeed there were, major consequences for individuals’ well-being, social cohesion and the economy. Yet for most citizens the lockdown was a little leisure event (see Roberts, 2011). There can be few if any actual citizens who experienced exactly 71 minutes extra leisure per day, who spent exactly 67 minutes less travelling, and an additional 40 minutes working at home. Few if any citizens can formerly have used all the out-of-home facilities that were closed.

We shall see that the lockdown experience in Britain endorses all leisure scholars’ claims about why leisure matters, while also exposing the difficulties in elevating a series of private little leisure experiences into big public issues. This has been left to sociologists’ and other leisure scholars’ imaginations (see Wright Mills, 1959).

**Well-being**

For over 30 years the ability of leisure to enhance individual well-being has been an unofficial mantra for the entire field of leisure studies (see Snape et al, 2017). Most leisure activities enhance physical and mental well-being (Iso-Ahola and Mannell, 2004). This benign impact can radiate into surrounding communities and wider societies (Haworth and Hart, 2007). Not all leisure confers a well-being benefit. The common denominator of those activities that deliver is social participation, and this has been known for over 50 years (see Phillips, 1967).

Lockdown locked most participation within households. People were no longer able to meet team and club mates, to visit their wider families, meet with groups of friends or relatives even in outdoor parks and restaurants. Types of leisure that offer peak ‘flow’ experience (see, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1993), and that sustain careers in ‘serious leisure‘ (see Stebbins, 1992, 2001, 2005), must have been interrupted (see also Heo et al, 2010). Solitude is beneficial for leisure activities such as reading. Leisure skills can be practised in private. However, the experience can be enhanced if the merits of a book are discussed with others, and if leisure skills and knowledge can be displayed among like-minded enthusiasts.

Today, communities are not just sustained but can be created online (see Mattar, 2003). During lockdown Zoom became a household name rather than a niche service for businesses and professions. Zoom was another of lockdown’s commercial winners (Sherman, 2020). That said, virtual relationships cannot offer all the benefits of real life interaction.

We know that since the mid-20th century economic growth has ceased to boost happiness and life satisfaction among the populations of the world’s richer countries (Layard, 2005). Happiness in Bolton, a town in north-west England, appears to have remained stable from 1938 to 2014 (McHugh and Carson, 2018). Leisure has been available to take-over as a happiness and life satisfaction driver, but this role stalled during lockdown.

Leisure scholars would have anticipated a decline in the population’s well-being, and this is exactly what happened in Britain. Surveys conducted by the Office for National Statistics during lockdown found 47 percent of the population complaining that their well-being had been affected, and 75 percent said that they had grown ‘worried’ or ‘very worried’ (Office for National Statistics, 2020c). The Mental Health Foundation (2020) reported that its services were being overwhelmed by demand, and that people seeking assistance were being stacked in long queues (see also Banks and Xu, 2020). Levels of domestic abuse rose to an extent that an expansion of sheltered accommodation was required (Women’s Aid, 2020).

A problem for leisure scholars will be familiar. When asked about their worries, respondents did not mention missing ‘little leisures’ such as being unable to meet for coffee mornings, to visit a pub or to play their favourite sports. They talked about a general loss of freedom and independence, and an inability to plan ahead. Thirty-six percent mentioned financial worries (Office for National Statistics, 2020c). Jobs and incomes had been lost or had become less secure. Leisure scholars have known for half a century that while levels of leisure participation are among the best predictors of expressed life satisfaction, they are lower down people’s own lists of priorities which are usually health, jobs and families (Hall and Perry, 1974). Well-being will not elevate leisure into a public issue. During lockdown well-being remained a series of private troubles with which individuals and families had to cope.

**Social cohesion**

In research among a nationally representative sample conducted by the Office for National Statistics (2020c), 57 percent of respondents thought that Britain would exit lockdown more united, and a kinder country than at the beginning. They must have shared the view of lockdown as a war on a virus in which all citizens made sacrifices to protect one another. However, only 22 percent thought that the country would emerge more equal.

A society consists of social relationships of inter-dependence, reciprocity and shared experiences. Social interaction and connectivity necessarily declined during lockdown. Even if people retained their jobs, they often worked at home without daily interaction with workplace colleagues. They were unable to go out except for exercise and essential shopping, always maintaining ‘distance’ from others. These are the *a priori* grounds for expecting lockdown to leave a less unified society. A Red Cross survey during May 2020 found that two-in-five adults complained of feeling lonelier under lockdown (Campbell, 2020).

Covid-19 itself, and then lockdown, definitely exposed existing social divisions. The socio-economic groups that suffered the most financially were in the middle. The top fifth were the most likely to retain their jobs, and to be able to work from home. The bottom fifth in terms of income were already relying on state pensions or Universal Credit, so could suffer little further damage. Those in the middle were the most vulnerable, and among them single parents, the least educated, and Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) groups (Benzeval et al, 2020).

All sections of the population could be attacked by the virus, but they were not equally vulnerable. Those most at risk of death with Covid-19 were the old, especially those with underlying medical conditions, patient-facing staff in health care, and anyone else working away from home. Men and women were equally at risk of infection, but men were more likely to die (Office for National Statistics, 2020a, 2020b). All BAME groups were more likely to die with Covid-19 than whites (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020; Public Health England, 2020). Ethnic minorities comprised 14 percent of the population, but by June 2020 they accounted for 34 percent of confirmed Covid-19 cases. They comprised 20 percent of National Health Service staff, but 64 percent of staff who died (Bailey and West, 2020). The reasons for all these inequalities are still not fully understood. In some cases the explanation would be underlying health conditions. In others the reasons would include exposure to infection by fellow workers, customers or patients. In further cases housing conditions would be relevant. Lockdown would be more stressful in an over-crowded high-rise flat than in a spacious house surrounded by a spacious garden.

Official surveys found nearly all respondents claiming to be obedient in following government instructions: leaving home only for exercise and essential shopping, and trying to maintain distance from others throughout (Office for National Statistics, 2020b). There were no questions in these surveys about transgressions, but these were always likely. Taking risks, stepping beyond what is permitted, acting affectively in response to emotion rather than instrumental rationality, are known to deliver some of the most intense, exciting leisure experiences (see Rojek, 2010; Spracklen, 2011; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012; Varley, 2011; Vester, 1987).

During the weekend that followed the government’s announcement that baby steps out of lockdown would begin soon, there was an outburst of protests in most major British cities. These had begun in the USA following the killing of George Floyd during his arrest by the Minneapolis police on May 25. Protests began in Minneapolis under the slogan ‘Black Lives Matter’, then spread across America and into Britain and Australia, then into numerous additional countries. The scale of the protests would have been due to the killing being caught on video which then circulated worldwide, and to Floyd’s last words being ‘I can’t breathe’ which seemed to express the feelings of ethnic minorities in many parts of the world. It would also have expressed how lockdown had been a suffocating experience for many whites who took to the streets, defying the rules forbidding large gatherings and requiring ‘distance’ to be maintained.

Lockdown in Britain was ending with the population more sensitive to social divisions, a more fractured society, than at the outset. Leisure scholars will not be surprised at how the experience of lockdown united different sections of the population while exposing differences between them.

**Economy**

Whether people spend money on admissions to sports events or music festivals is inconsequential for a national economy. In contrast, it is highly consequential if total spending on leisure goods and services declines (Roberts, 2011). This is because the leisure industries have become major sectors in most countries’ economies, and most provisions are now commercial (Roberts, 2016).

Lockdown closed most retail outlets and all paid-for out-of-home leisure facilities. There was an immediate decline of over 80 percent in spending on hotels, pubs, restaurants and travel. Spending on digital subscriptions rose by over 50 percent. Providers of online entertainment and meetings became lockdown’s big commercial winners (PWC, 2020).

Leisure businesses are now major employers. Many of the jobs are part-time. Some are seasonal. The work is usually low paid. Their presence in the leisure industries explains why the bottom decile of earners were the most vulnerable during lockdown. Thirty-four percent compared with just five percent in the top earning decile were employed in businesses that closed (Benzeval et al, 2020). The most vulnerable were from just above the bottom fifth in terms of household income who were normally dependent on state welfare or wage top-ups from Universal Credit.

By the end of May 2020 Britain had eight million workers furloughed, and a further two million benefitting from the self-employed support scheme (PWC, 2020). If just a half of these became unemployed when the schemes ended, the unemployment rate threatened to rise to levels unprecedented since the 1930s. There is a lesson for leisure scholars here. Its economic significance is the lever that makes leisure a public issue.

The UK population was earning less during lockdown and was therefore spending less. People whose incomes were maintained had less opportunity to spend when most retail and all out-of-home leisure businesses closed. In addition, people who were worried about their financial prospects cut back on spending, repaid debts and saved if they could. There were knock-on effects for other services and manufacturing. Car sales plummeted. Motor manufacturers and component suppliers laid-off staff. People were instructed to stay at home, so spending on public transport and air travel fell. Aviation ground almost to a halt. Airlines cancelled orders for new aircraft, which led to job losses in manufacturers of aircraft engines and other components. There were further knock-on effects for the suppliers of commodities – steel, oil and other minerals. This is how lockdowns in country-after-country propelled the world into a deep recession.

During April 2020 The International Monetary Fund announced that *‘…the world has been put in a Great Lockdown. The magnitude and speed of collapse in activity that has followed is unlike anything experienced in our lifetimes….we project global growth in 2020 to fall to -3 percent…This makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis.’* The UK economy was expected to contract by 6.5 percent during 2020 (Gopinah, 2020). More disturbing, shortly after easing the lockdown started, the OECD (2020) forecast that the UK economy would slump by 11.5 percent in 2020. European countries were already teetering on the brink of recession when lockdown began. The UK economy contracted by 2.0 percent in the first quarter pf 2020. In the Eurozone it was 3.8 percent.

It was the threat of a depression deeper than in the 1930s and sky-high unemployment that accelerated European countries out of lockdown. Unrest in the streets indicating a weakening of the ‘social fabric’, and waiting lists for mental health services were less efficacious than an impending economic horror. The European countries that moved fastest out of lockdowns did not all have below-average Covid-19 infection rates at that time. The Mediterranean countries – Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal – all economies with large tourism sectors, wanted to save as much of the summer 2020 season as possible.

The leisure industries had an additional attraction for governments whose priority by mid-2020 was at least to alleviate an impending recession. Leisure businesses could be set free in just one country. Manufacturing is different. Supply and customer chains are global. Ideally all countries need to reflate their economies together. This is unnecessary with leisure. Hotels, restaurants, gyms, sport stadiums, museums and so on can simply be opened for business, at the service of nationals and tourists. However, opening doors and putting planes in the sky does not guarantee that there will be customers.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The UK stuttered into easing lockdown. The four nations differed in the details and the timing of their first baby steps. The UK government’s proposal that all schools should re-open before the end of the school year ran into opposition from teacher associations, some local authorities, and some parents. The government soon conceded that some schools would not re-open until September. Perversely, it appeared, given that the exit from lockdown was beginning, the government announced that from June 8 all arrivals in the UK would be subject to 14 days quarantine. The only plausible explanation, though never given, was to inhibit entry by foreign tourists when hotels, restaurants and all ‘attractions’ remained closed, and to discourage overseas holidays by nationals on which they were likely to mingle with visitors from numerous countries at Mediterranean resorts, with all distancing abandoned during the nightlife. Some baby steps from lockdown perplexed many people. Groups of up to six from any households were to be allowed to gather, but only outdoors, and with at least two metres distance maintained from members of a different household. A single person household could form a ‘bubble’ with another household and those inside the bubble could meet inside each other’s homes. Television crews were able to capture elderly loners who were delighted to be able to hug children and grandchildren after over two months apart. Other families were incredulous that the government was permitting them to behave as they had done throughout lockdown. One change that everyone understood was the re-opening of shops on June 15, subject of course to distancing. Public toilets remained locked.

The country was scattered widely between fearful and enthusiastic exiters. Many people were clearly prepared for an extended separation from leisure activities that had been prohibited since March 23. At that time the government had believed (wrongly) that it would be difficult to persuade the public to accept the restrictions that were being enforced. In the event, people had been scared by images from Wuhan and Lodi, and daily rising infection and fatality figures at home. It proved more difficult to persuade a substantial minority to exit. During lockdown the percentage of the population believing that disruption would last for at least another six months rose from 33 percent to 44 percent, and 29 percent felt unsafe whenever they went outside their homes. During the last week in May a fifth of the population, around 12 million people, self-isolated at some point, suspecting that they were developing Covid-19 symptoms. At that time only around 60,000 were infected (Office for National Statistics, 2020b). The government could present daily statistics showing that infections and deaths from Covid-19 were declining, but if lockdown was responsible for the decline, surely any easing would set the figures rising again. An R statistic (the average number of infections by each index case), calculated with algorithms comprehensible only by epidemiological modellers, was not declining but hovering just beneath ‘1’. This seemed incompatible with declining numbers of infections. In fact there was no incompatibility. Provided R remained slightly below ‘1’ the number of new infections would decline exponentially, which was happening at the time when easing lockdown was announced.

In mid-2020 the world faced an uncertain future. When, if ever, there would be an effective vaccine and treatment for Covid-19 was unknown. So was whether, in the northern hemisphere, declining infection rates meant that the new corona virus was fading away for ever or taking a seasonal hibernation before reviving next winter. Would all countries have to learn to live with Covid-19 indefinitely? If so, could the virus be contained by trace-test-isolate alone or would this need to be reinforced by distancing? In the latter case a return to the old normal would not be an option.

There was a worldwide debate about a new normal. People might prefer to retain aspects of life that had become necessary during lockdown. Working from home, less travelling and therefore cleaner air were favourites in Britain. Replacing old manufacturing with green technologies and products was another. It was unclear whether liberal democracies would be sufficiently liberal to allow citizens to manage their own risks, in which case in Britain it appeared that a substantial minority would opt to stay safe, at home, otherwise in bubbles, while others rushed back to former lifestyles thereby reinforcing the need to stay at home by those opting for safety.

There will be more lessons for leisure studies in the months and years that follow than during the 2020 lockdowns. How many of the additional minutes per day will digital media retain? Will joggers, runners and solo cyclists return to gyms and sports clubs? Will there be a spate of inventing Covid-19 compatible leisure activities, comparable to the inventiveness of the late-19th century which was a response to industrialisation, urbanisation and rising real incomes? Innovations could be forms of sport, vacations and association compatible with distancing. Some old sports and games, from swimming to chess, will prove more adaptable than others.

One certainty in mid-2020 was that Britain had lost 20 percent of its economy and an even larger proportion of jobs. The damage was done in a day: recovery could take years. The industries catering for out-of-home leisure were the first to be hit and the hardest hit by lockdown. It is hardly surprising that these industries became major lobbyists for lifting restrictions. Survival was at stake for hotel and restaurant chains, airlines and airports, professional spectator sports, media channels that used live top sport as their battering ram into the market, and entertainers who depended on live audiences for their livelihoods. Consumers may have been willing to give-up their little leisures during lockdown, at least temporarily, but the providers’ existence was at risk. They could command politicians’ attention because leisure was the sector in which a national government could spark an instant recovery.

It was impossible to predict how many customers would return if and when pubs and restaurants resumed trade, and if airlines would fill all the seats on the planes that they put in the sky. Consumers would decide, but only if a government allowed its citizens to manage their own risks.

There will be more lessons for leisure scholars on the ‘other side’ of the 2020 pandemic. We will gain new, more penetrating insights into for whom, why and which leisure really matters. This paper’s timeline finishes in June 2020 but the narrative is ongoing. It will run for years to come.

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