

OCTOBER 24/25 2020

FT Weekend Magazine

# CORONAVIRUS AND EUROPE: WHAT WENT WRONG?



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ED VAN DER ELSKEN

‘People are relentlessly in motion – running, stooping, begging, jostling, fighting, dancing, kissing, stripping, animated in conversation’

The photographs of Ed van der Elsken, p30



‘This savoury cake gives root vegetables a sexy makeover and a moment to shine’

Ravinder Bhogal, p42



‘I thought if I don’t actually step up and do this, I would never forgive myself’

Sima Ladjevardian, one of the Democratic candidates trying to turn Texas blue, p24

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Issue number 893 • Online [ft.com/magazine](http://ft.com/magazine) • FT Weekend Magazine is printed by the Walsstead Group in the UK and published by The Financial Times Ltd, Bracken House, 1 Friday Street, London EC4M 9BT © The Financial Times Ltd 2020 • No part of this magazine may be reproduced in any form without the prior express permission of the publisher

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# SIMON KUPER

OPENING SHOT

## Big cities: no place for the urban poor



**T**hankfully, the drummer in the flat above us has moved out. I'm guessing he couldn't afford central Paris once gigs melted away. Our corner café is boarded up and more will follow, given the city's new 9pm curfew. There are queues at the foodbank opposite my office.

When people speculate about how the pandemic will change big cities, they mostly talk about the Zooming classes fleeing the Big Smoke. Yet there are only modest signs of this happening so far. Rather, as the pandemic enters its mass-impooverishment phase, another development looks more likely: the new poor will leave big cities. This is the exodus that could reshape urban life in the coming years. "We have entered a new epoch. We are not fully capable of seeing that," says Saskia Sassen of Columbia University, the urbanist who coined the term "global city".

Long before the pandemic struck, many poorer urbanites were just hanging on, not living even a downscale version of the Dick Whittington dream of coming to the city and making their fortunes. In New York City in 2018, 29 per cent of all households had incomes of \$30,000 or less. Most renters in that category spent the bulk of their income on housing, calculates New York University's Furman Center. Similarly, millions of Londoners overpaid for cramped flats, long commutes and bad weather. London has Britain's highest incomes but lowest life satisfaction, reports the Office for National Statistics.

The working classes weren't the only ones suffering. So were "probably a majority of residents of most of our cities", says Sassen. "Half the middle classes are richer than they ever thought they would be, and half are poorer."

When urbanites first lost their jobs this spring, many sat it out hoping for a swift recovery. Now it's clear that low-wage industries such as tourism, restaurants, bars, shopping and the arts (a big employer of the bohemian proletariat) won't revive any time soon. If you lose your job in a small town you can probably afford to stay put, but not in premium cities. Falling demand in New York and San Francisco is already pushing down rents.

London's population will surely decline from this year's all-time peak of 9.3 million. Many immigrants will return to their native countries, predicts Ben Rogers, director of the Centre for London think-tank, who notes that half the city's workers in the accommodation and food-services sector last year were non-Britons. If you're unemployed, you want to be paying Romanian rather than London rents. Some younger people will rediscover their childhood bedrooms.

London's worst-hit area might be Hounslow: nearly a third of the borough's residents have jobs that depend directly or indirectly on now semi-abandoned Heathrow Airport, warns Hounslow Council. Outer west London is generally vulnerable to economic damage from Covid-19,

says the UK's Institute for Fiscal Studies. Next, Brexit takes effect.

One possible scenario for big cities is shrinkage. In the 1970s, New York City lost 800,000 residents and much of its tax base. Expect ballooning social problems and possibly crime.

Compared with the damage from the new poor leaving, working from home should hurt cities less. The metropolis is losing some of its workplace function, but after the pandemic it will regain its networking and playground functions. That means that living in Manhattan, central London or Paris will remain attractive. In fact, these places just keep getting nicer as they push out cars. No wonder that house prices - at or near

### 'Many immigrants will return home. If you're unemployed, you want to be paying Romanian rather than London rents'

record levels in London and Paris - have held up better than rents. A homebuyer has a 20- or 30-year horizon, whereas a renter typically plans for two or three years at most. It's hard to imagine London shrinking for decades, as it did from 1951 through 1991.

Most well-off urbanites will ride out the pandemic, paying rock-bottom interest rates to work from home (or "live at work", as Miranda Sharp, a trustee at the Centre for Cities, says). A minority of the middle class may have to sell - airline pilots, marketing and advertising executives, conference organisers and the like - but there's an almost endless supply of rich people around the world waiting to buy pads in top-tier cities.

As the poor leave, some young people (though maybe not enough) will replace them, because the metropolis remains the ideal place to start a career and play the mating game. Underused central business districts and shops will eventually be converted into homes, which will make housing cheaper and cities even more fun.

Big cities will rebound. Mining towns in northern England didn't, but they had only one industry whereas a big city has many. A decade from now, low-paid service workers will fill poorer urban neighbourhoods once more. Then cities will again have to choose their response. Make these people's lives bearable by instituting a local minimum wage, such as the \$15 an hour that New York City introduced for all employees on December 31, weeks before the pandemic struck? Automate poorly paid functions like cleaning, care and cappuccino-making? Build cheap housing for essential workers such as nurses and police officers? Or exploit yet another generation of the urban precariat? **FT**

simon.kuper@ft.com @KuperSimon



# 'My parents were right. Getting to university really was the start of this journey'



**INVENTORY** JIM McDONALD, ENGINEER

**Professor Sir Jim McDonald, 65, was elected president of the Royal Academy of Engineering in 2019. One of Scotland's most accomplished engineers, he has been principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Strathclyde since 2009 and co-chairs the Scottish government's Energy Advisory Board. He was knighted in 2012 for services to education, engineering and the economy.**

**What was your childhood or earliest ambition?**  
To be like my dad. He was my hero. I lost him when I was 12.

**Private school or state school? University or straight into work?**  
I was brought up and educated in Govan, the shipbuilding district in the heart of Glasgow. State schools: primary schools, St Anthony's and St Constantine's; secondary, St Gerard's. I was planning to leave at 16 and go into the shipyards. Advice from my mother and

encouragement from my teachers persuaded me to stay on and go to Strathclyde University. I was a graduate apprentice - I got professional experience with the Scottish Electrical Training Scheme. By the time I graduated, I had a good education and was familiar with the world of work.

**Who was or still is your mentor?**  
I have many, from many sources.

**How physically fit are you?**  
Reasonably! I play in a badminton club and, when I'm not travelling, I squeeze in a game of golf on a Sunday morning.

**How politically committed are you?**  
I keep aware of current affairs and key policy matters but I'm not a member of any political party.

**Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?**  
I was always encouraged to do as good a job as I could do and make what I was given better when I left it. I think that's down to talent and application. I've always had

ambition for the places where I've worked and the people around me. If ambition's too much about oneself, you can forget to bring along those around you.

**What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?**  
A full head of hair. A fully electric high-performance car.

**What's your biggest extravagance?**  
Anything to do with my wife and children. I love to buy for my family. Golf-club fees, fishing-club fees and season tickets to Celtic Park.

**In what place are you happiest?**  
At home, or in the countryside or on the water. I live in rural Ayrshire so I walk out of my back door into rolling fields: fresh air, open spaces.

**What ambitions do you still have?**  
To make it possible for as many young people as possible to pursue a career in engineering. To transform engineering outcomes into benefits for society, the economy and sustainability.

**What drives you on?**  
The joy of working with others to

solve problems. Wanting to have an impact both as a leader and an engineer.

**What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?**  
Becoming vice-chancellor of the university where I was educated. And to be president of the Royal Academy of Engineering is an enormous privilege.

**What do you find most irritating in other people?**  
Pointing out the reasons why things can't be done, instead of looking for the solutions.

**If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?**  
"It's my dad!" I'll put that down to the ravages of time. And: "You know what, my parents' hard work has really paid off. They were right. Getting to university really was the start of this journey."

**Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?**  
A beautiful set of cufflinks given to me to mark my becoming vice-chancellor. A failed bag zip meant it got lost between London and Hong Kong. And my first electric guitar: a white Gibson Les Paul, which I worked a solid year to afford. I played it for five years then in a fit of generosity gave it to a youngster who lived up my street. I was half expecting to get it back later, but they moved.

**What is the greatest challenge of our time?**  
Tackling climate change and achieving global sustainability. I am truly excited about the academy's new strategy, which focuses our efforts to come up with engineering solutions - engineering the pathway to 2050 and a net-zero future. I think engineering has the opportunity to make a disproportionate contribution.

**Do you believe in an afterlife?**  
Yes. I'm a regular churchgoer.

**If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?**  
Personally, nine-plus. I've got a wonderful wife and three fantastic kids, my twin daughters and my son, all of whom are engineers. Professionally, I'm going to apply the 80/20 rule and give myself an eight. We should always strive to be better and I've got plenty of headroom. **FT**

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*Interview by Hester Lacey. This is Engineering.org.uk is a campaign led by the Royal Academy of Engineering in collaboration with EngineeringUK and industry partners. This is Engineering Day is on November 4 2020.*

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# TECH WORLD



BY YUAN YANG IN BEIJING

## Open backdoors into chat apps and spies will use them

This week I read the news that my government was trying to make it harder for me to communicate securely. That would be a normal occurrence in China, where online privacy has deteriorated every year I've lived here. But this latest blow came from a different source: the UK government. The justice departments of the "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing alliance – the UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – have asked once more for tech companies to give them "lawful access" to encrypted communications.

In other words, these governments want backdoors into encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Signal. The term "backdoor" has been popularised more recently by the Trump administration's campaign against Chinese tech, accusing Huawei and other companies of leaving backdoors for Chinese government access.

As a foreign correspondent in China, I would much prefer Boris Johnson to be reading my private messages than Xi Jinping, although neither prospect is very comforting. But it is unproductive to say things could be worse in China; that is barely any comfort, either, for citizens living in the west. There is a different link we need to explore between UK and Chinese government backdoors: that bad domestic cyber policy decreases our ability to defend against foreign adversaries.

Any form of surveillance creates a pool of data that bad actors can try to access. Breaking end-to-end

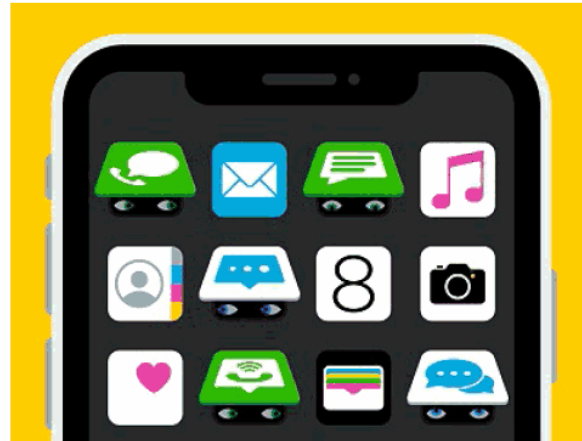


ILLUSTRATION BY PATE

encryption, in particular, leaves gaping vulnerabilities for hackers to exploit.

The reason for this is in the otherwise tight design of such programs. An app such as Signal encrypts your messages so that they can only be accessed using a private key, or password, that is generated on your phone and is sealed there. Signal's servers and programmers can't access the key and use it to decrypt your messages as they flow through the internet. The only person who can access it is the person in control of the phone, the message's final "end point": hence the term end-to-end encryption.

The efficacy of end-to-end encryption means that everyone, from banks to ecommerce sites to healthcare systems, relies on it to protect their users. Without access to the private key, the number of

**'Any form of surveillance creates a pool of data that bad actors can try to access. Breaking end-to-end encryption, in particular, leaves gaping vulnerabilities for hackers to exploit'**

calculations it would take to break open a well-encrypted message would take longer than a lifetime.

As a result, backdoors into end-to-end encrypted communications usually require app designers to produce extra keys that are given to law enforcement agencies. But unlike the keys stored on a device, these extra keys are designed to be shared. Their existence increases dramatically the chance that a key gets leaked. Once a key is leaked, all the contents of the encrypted messages can be read.

In general, if a security flaw exists, it is only a matter of time before someone finds it. Even tools built by government agencies such as the NSA have ended up in the hands of Chinese, North Korean and Russian hackers. Creating a master set of keys to access all encrypted communications would mean building a nuclear internet bomb without the ability to guard it.

Foreign spies have abused "lawful intercept" backdoors in the past. One high-profile example comes from the telecoms industry – the same market Huawei dominates, to the concern of the Five Eyes governments. In what has become known as "Greek Watergate" or the "Athens Affair", in 2004-05, the prime minister of Greece and more than 100 high-ranking officials and executives had their phonelines hacked. Someone had taken advantage of the lawful intercept ability embedded into the Ericsson equipment used by Vodafone. The episode also involved the apparent suicide of a Vodafone engineer.

Once you lose trust over security, it is difficult to get it back. People would stop conducting commercial transactions, for example, over platforms with backdoors once those backdoors have been exploited. Then they would shift to the newer platforms that spring up – before the government clamps down on them. And enforcement would be ugly: if Facebook continued to hold out against installing backdoors, would the UK ban WhatsApp?

We must make our systems robust against a world in which bad actors, such as China's spy agencies, will always be a threat. It is pointless to keep fretting over the rise of China – we need to prepare to coexist. To do so, governments should make their domestic cyber policies consistent with their international objectives. There is still, broadly speaking, one global internet: we have to defend it. **34**

*Yuan Yang is the FT's deputy Beijing bureau chief*



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or a road sign to be a road sign, it needs to be placed in proximity to traffic. Inevitably, it is only a matter of time before someone drives into the pole. If the pole is sturdy, the results may be fatal.

The 99% *Invisible City*, a delightful new book about the under-appreciated wonders of good design, explains a solution. The poles that support street furniture are often mounted on a “slip base”, which joins an upper pole to a mostly buried lower pole using easily breakable bolts.

A car does not wrap itself around a slip-based pole; instead, the base gives way quickly. Some slip bases are even set at an angle, launching the upper pole into the air over the vehicle. The sign is easily repaired, since the base itself is undamaged. Isn't that clever?

There are two elements to the cleverness. One is specific: the detailed design of the slip-base system. But the other, far more general, is a way of thinking which anticipates that things sometimes go wrong and then plans accordingly.

That way of thinking was evidently missing in England's stuttering test-and-trace system, which, in early October, failed spectacularly. Public Health England revealed that 15,841 positive test results had neither been published nor passed on to contact tracers.

The proximate cause of the problem was reported to be the use of an outdated file format in an Excel spreadsheet. Excel is flexible and any idiot can use it but it is not the right tool for this sort of job. It could fail in several disastrous ways; in this case, the spreadsheet simply ran out of rows to store the data.

But the deeper cause seems to be that nobody with relevant expertise had been invited to consider the failure modes of the system. What if we get hacked? What if someone pastes the wrong formula into the spreadsheet? What if we run out of numbers?

We should all spend more time thinking about the prospect of failure and what we might do about it. It is a useful mental habit but it is neither easy nor enjoyable.

We humans thrive on optimism. Without the capacity to banish worst-case scenarios from our minds, we could hardly live life at all. Who could marry, try for a baby, set up a business or do anything else that matters while obsessing about what might go wrong? It is more pleasant and more natural to hope for the best.



## TIM HARFORD

### THE UNDERCOVER ECONOMIST



## The power of negative thinking

We must be careful, then, when we allow ourselves to stare steadily at the prospect of failure. Stare too long, or with eyes too wide, and we will be so paralysed with anxiety that success, too, becomes impossible.

Care is also needed in the steps we take to prevent disaster. Some precautions cause more trouble than they prevent. Any safety engineer can reel off a list of accidents caused by malfunctioning safety systems: too many backups add complexity and new ways to fail.

My favourite example - described in the excellent book *Meltdown* by Chris Clearfield and András Tilcsik - was the fiasco at the Academy Awards of 2017, when *La La Land* was announced as the winner of the Best Picture Oscar that was intended for *Moonlight*. The mix-up was made possible by the existence of duplicates of each award envelope - a precaution that triggered the catastrophe.

But just because it is hard to think productively about the risk of failure does not mean we should give up. One gain is that of contingency planning: if you anticipate possible problems, you have the opportunity to prevent them or to prepare the ideal response.

A second advantage is the possibility of rapid learning. When the aeronautical engineer Paul MacCready was working on human-powered aircraft in the 1970s, his plane - the Gossamer Condor - was designed to be easily modified and easily repaired after the inevitable crashes. (At one stage, the tail flap was adjusted by taping a Manila folder to it.)

Where others had spent years failing to win the prestigious Kremer prize for human-powered flight, MacCready's team succeeded in months. One secret to their success was that the feedback loop of fly -> crash -> adapt was quick and cheap.

Not every project is an aeroplane but there are plenty of analogies. When we launch a new project we might think about prototyping, gathering data, designing small experiments and avidly searching for feedback from the people who might see what we do not.

If we expect that things will go wrong, we design our projects to make learning and adapting part of the process. When we ignore the possibility of failure, when it comes it is likely to be expensive and hard to learn from.

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**'We should all spend more time thinking about the prospect of failure and what we might do about it. It is a useful mental habit'**

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The third advantage of thinking seriously about failure is that we may turn away from projects that are doomed from the outset. From the invasion of Iraq to the process of Brexit, seriously exploring the daunting prospect of disaster might have provoked the wise decision not to start in the first place.

But I have strayed a long way from the humble slip base. It would be nice if all failure could be anticipated so perfectly and elegantly. Alas, the world is a messier place. All around us are failures - of business models, of pandemic planning, even of our democratic institutions. It is fanciful to imagine designing slip bases for everything.

Still: most things fail, sooner or later. Some fail gracefully, some disgracefully. It is worth giving that some thought. **13**

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*Tim Harford's new book is "How to Make the World Add Up"*





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# HOW CORONAVIRUS EXPOSED EUROPE'S WEAKNESSES

For many Europeans the moment coronavirus arrived on their continent was on February 23 when Italian authorities quarantined 10 small towns south-east of Milan. They watched, agog, as the carabinieri cordoned off access, trapping residents inside their infected neighbourhoods.

Few had imagined that the kind of draconian controls imposed by China in Wuhan would be necessary or indeed feasible in a European democracy. The lockdown of Lombardy's "red zone" should have punctured any complacency. And yet it took another two to three weeks for governments across the continent

to appreciate the scale of infection in their own countries and take sweeping measures to contain it.

Some countries coped admirably with the first wave – or had the good fortune of minimal exposure to the virus. Others were hampered by poor preparedness, indecisive leadership and discord between central, regional and local governments. Nations squabbled and failed to learn from each other. The EU itself wobbled under the strain. These are five of the key moments that shaped Europe's early response – and, in some cases, continue to plague its handling of the pandemic as a second wave crashes over the continent.

EDITED BY BEN HALL AS PART OF A SPECIAL FT SERIES • ILLUSTRATION BY DIEGO CADENA BEJARANO







**'I realised that, actually, all those cases that we had mistaken for flu then turned out to be Covid-19'**

**Pietro Poidomani, a Lombardy GP**



Nurses prepare a patient for transport at Cremona Hospital on March 29 in Lombardy

# ITALY

**MILES JOHNSON AND  
DAVIDE GHIGLIONE IN ROME**

Last December, when Pietro Poidomani, a general practitioner in the town of Cividate al Piano in Lombardy, began to notice patients with high fevers, he wondered if the flu vaccine that year had been faulty. Some had severe coughs, while others were suffering from what appeared to be pneumonia. "We had started to see some strange things, different from usual but also similar in some ways to the seasonal flu," he remembers.

It was not, however, until more than three months later that the arrival of a young patient in a small hospital in Codogno, 50km south of Poidomani's surgery, would shock Italy. The patient's admission set in train a series of events that would shape the early global response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Three days after his arrival, at 9.20pm on February 20, the 37-year-old, referred to at the time only as "Mattia", became the first person in Italy to test positive for Covid-19. The condition of this young, healthy man, whose wife was eight months pregnant, quickly worsened, and he was moved to intensive care. Days later, Codogno, along with a

cluster of small nearby towns in Lombardy and one in neighbouring Veneto, were placed in lockdown.

In less than a month, the region's hospitals were flooded with cases, and footage of dead bodies being removed by military trucks was beamed across the world. Events there helped trigger a sharp about-turn in how to tackle the virus as far afield as London and Washington DC.

"Many scientists in Europe had until then been analysing data from China and Korea, and the assumption was that coronavirus would end up being relatively mild. This was the message being conveyed to policymakers," says Igor Rudan, chair in international health and molecular medicine at the University of Edinburgh. "Then Lombardy happened and it was our worst nightmare. We could not make sense of the numbers in Italy - the deaths were just so high. Everyone suddenly started questioning everything they had thought up to that point."

Doctors, experts and local officials now believe that the horror that unfolded inside Lombardy's hospitals in March - prompting scientists to sharply revise up their predictions of likely deaths, and governments to scramble to build special Covid-19 hospitals - was shaped by a series of small but critical local decisions that would have a global impact.

Days after "Mattia" had tested positive, a flustered Giuseppe Conte, Italy's prime minister, criticised the hospital in Codogno for failing to contain the virus. The facility, Conte said, had not followed "the prudent protocols that are recommended in these cases, and this has certainly contributed to the spread". He warned that Italy's central government was ready to step in if needed.

Attilio Fontana, Lombardy's regional governor, who under the country's devolved healthcare system had responsibility for the hospital, took Conte's words as a direct challenge to his authority. But he was also now under immense pressure to show Lombardy's prized health system was up to the task. It was during these critical days in late February and March that the region's hospitals, which are ranked among the best in Italy, began to be flooded with Covid-19 patients.

Niccolò Carretta, a regional councillor in Lombardy, says the health system responded very quickly, doubling the available intensive care beds in a few days. But, he argues, the region lacked an early-warning system. "Because of the region's more centralised system of large hospitals, partly private, and with fewer and fewer equipped general practitioners on the ground, this is one of the reasons why we were not able to anticipate

what was coming," he says. "We realised in a few days that we were full of Covid-19 patients up to our necks."

For Poidomani, the GP in Civitate al Piano, the symptoms he had started noticing in December now made worrying sense. The virus had in fact been spreading around Lombardy for months already, meaning the hospitals now risked becoming incubators for the disease they were trying to treat. "I realised that, actually, all those cases that we had mistaken for flu then turned out to be Covid-19. The virus had already filled the whole territory with such a load that it broke through the barricades of our health system," he says. "Some hospitals became hotbeds themselves, turning into real time bombs."

Rudan believes that in the rush to treat patients, too many were admitted into hospital in a short space of time. This resulted in a vast increase in infections among vulnerable populations. "I would not blame anyone here. Things were happening way too quickly and it resulted in a tragedy," he says. "But when you bring people with Covid into small hospitals where there are very vulnerable people, it will result in far higher deaths."

By the second week of March, the number of patients in hospitals in Lombardy was surging. Out of about 750 intensive care beds, more than 600 were full, with doctors terrified that the system was already approaching breaking point. Many patients were being put on ventilators and many were dying. Scientists around the world, who were still operating with limited data, were alarmed by the extremely high mortality rate - running at more than 5 per cent of diagnosed cases in Lombardy at that point - and the vast numbers being admitted to intensive care units.

"When people started to see what was happening in Lombardy's hospitals, a lot of the planning and expectations for the virus quickly changed," says Paul Hunter, a professor of health protection at the University of East Anglia. "Many, including myself, at that point thought we were facing a threat more like Sars but we were shocked by the rapid spread and severity of the epidemic. The fact this was going to be different was really hammered home by the events in Italy."

After inputting this information into their models, a group of scientists, led by epidemiology professor Neil Ferguson at Imperial College London, published a bombshell report on March 16. They predicted that ICUs in the UK would quickly reach capacity, and hundreds of thousands would probably die. In the US, the number of deaths was predicted to hit 1.2 million. "This conclusion has only been reached in the last few days," the report said, "with the refinement of estimates of likely ICU demand due to Covid-19 based on experience in Italy and the UK."

From Whitehall to Washington DC, governments started to shift course. "How much that specific report influenced government policy is hard to know for certain, but the data from Italy was critical in changing perspectives about what was about to happen in Europe," says Hunter. "This was Europe, not a faraway place, and for both politicians and scientists, having this happening so close to home had a big impact."

Back in Codogno in late March, "Mattia" was taken off a ventilator, regained consciousness and was discharged from hospital. The world he walked out into had been transformed.

# SPAIN



A deserted Plaza Mayor during lockdown in Madrid, April 21

## DANIEL DOMBEY IN MADRID

The doctor leading Spain's efforts against coronavirus could not have been clearer. "There is no virus in Spain," said Fernando Simón, head of the country's health emergency co-ordination centre, on February 23. "The disease is not being spread, nor at present is there any case."

At that time, Spain's experience of coronavirus - such as it was - seemed to be receding into the rear-view mirror. The country had logged a grand total of two infected people - both had contracted the virus outside Spain and since recovered. "The situation is frankly good," Carmen Calvo, the deputy prime minister, said on February 25. In fact, it was already very bad.

Simón was wrong to insist there were no live cases or community transmission. At that moment, coronavirus was spreading fast in Spain, soon to be hit harder than any other country in the EU. The problem was that public health procedures made it impossible to track the full extent of the pandemic.

On February 25, Spain reported that an Italian couple holidaying in Tenerife had tested positive. Local officials acted swiftly, placing several hundred people staying in the same hotel under quarantine.

More seriously, infections were already spreading undetected in Spain's biggest cities.

The country was flying blind. It turned out to be a critical failure - one repeated elsewhere in Europe and beyond. Spain's response to coronavirus was hampered by a highly partisan political atmosphere and a regionalised healthcare system that lacked central co-ordination. But its inability to chart the early spread of infection and consequent delays in locking down also contributed to a tragic outcome: Spain has the second-highest death toll in the EU after Italy.

Today, as Spain wrestles with a second outbreak that is again among the worst in Europe, the debate over what went wrong in the spring - and how much the government was to blame - is more relevant than ever. "It has been a systematic failure by the country," says Pedro Alonso, a Spanish epidemiologist at Barcelona university.

Within a month of Simón's statement, Spain was registering 10,000 cases a day. The true level of contagion, he later acknowledged, was probably 10 times greater: according to official estimates, more than two million people were infected during the first wave. By the first week of April, hospitals were putting beds in gyms, corridors, libraries and tents. In Madrid, the worst-affected part of the country, ►



◀the number of people requiring intensive care was roughly three times pre-pandemic capacity, forcing hospitals to install makeshift ICUs in operating rooms and respiratory units.

"I've been practising for 30 years. Here in the hospital we have had to treat missionaries with Ebola," says José Ramón Arribas, head of the infectious diseases unit at Madrid's La Paz hospital. "Ebola was nothing compared to this."

Until the last days of February, diagnostic tests were almost entirely limited to people who had travelled from or were connected to Hubei province in China, where the pandemic originated. This was in line with other European countries but it proved a big mistake.

"We wanted to do more diagnostic tests, especially of patients who were being hospitalised with pneumonia, but they were only authorised for people who came from Wuhan," says Arribas. "There was a discrepancy between what we in the hospitals asked for - more PCR tests - and what the public health officials recommended... They insisted that the risk in Spain was very low."

The restrictions on testing made it impossible to detect whether people were spreading the virus in the country itself. It turned out they were, in large numbers. "It's a basic error of public health," says Alonso. "You only see what you are looking for. If you prohibit people from looking for something, you will never find it. And that's exactly what happened in Spain in these critical, critical weeks."

In fact, a later postmortem examination revealed a patient with coronavirus had died on February 13.

The holes in the data and the flawed testing protocol led to a fatal complacency. Critics say that both national and regional authorities were too slow to impose controls - mistakes they went on to repeat this summer when restrictions were relaxed and a second wave of infection took hold.

"What was happening in Italy gave us almost two weeks' notice," says Arribas of La Paz hospital. "But we did not prepare enough." Even after Italy imposed a lockdown on 16 million people in the north of the country, it took several days for the Spanish government to put similar restrictions in

place. Speaking on Sunday March 8, hours after Rome's dramatic intervention, Salvador Illa, Spain's health minister, described the Italian lockdown as "very drastic", adding: "We ourselves do not need such measures today."

That same day, the leftwing government permitted a 120,000-strong International Women's Day march in Madrid - a decision that rapidly became a political football. The hard-right Vox party depicted it as a criminal act carried out in the name of feminism, although many epidemiologists say the march was not an important spreader of infection. What really mattered, according to Miquel Porta at Barcelona's Municipal Institute for Medical Research, was that almost three million people were cramming into Madrid metro and commuter trains each day - and millions were also piling into the city's bars and restaurants.

Reports had already begun to come into the health ministry indicating that Spain itself was experiencing a surge in infections. Official figures for March 8 showed that the number of registered cases had increased by 70 per cent in just 24 hours, reaching a total of 999. "We were seeing an exponential increase in patients," says Arribas. "The hospitals began to fill up very quickly indeed."

On March 9, several regions, including Madrid, announced the imminent closure of their schools. On March 12, José Luis Martínez-Almeida, the mayor of Madrid, suggested that the city might have to be shut down. But the Spanish government only agreed to a lockdown two days later.

"It was only when the tip of the iceberg led the hospitals to collapse that they declared the state of alert," says Alonso. "But it was only the tip and underneath it there was an enormous level of transmission."

Simón maintains that "only a few days" are at issue in terms of how long it took the government to react. "Our information did not indicate until the morning of Monday March 9 that there was any need to close anything down... Could we have acted earlier? It is very difficult to judge," he told the FT in June. "People can say it could have been a day before or a day later but we did things very well."



# F R A N C E

VICTOR MALLET IN PARIS

**W**hen French President Emmanuel Macron visited an old people's home in Paris on March 6, he had an urgent public message to deliver: protect the vulnerable from coronavirus. "I know it's sometimes heartbreaking, but we must do our best to avoid visiting our elderly," he said.

He talked of hygiene and warned against physical touching, but neither visitors nor residents nor staff were wearing face masks, which was not yet official policy. At the time, France had officially recorded only nine deaths from Covid-19, including the first fatality announced in Europe, an 80-year-old Chinese tourist from Hubei province.

Macron knew the old were much more vulnerable than the young, but he and the health officials and carers around him had little inkling of the catastrophe that was already sweeping through care homes in France and across the continent. Within weeks, thousands would be dead. "People didn't realise what was happening," says Tatiana



Barcelona residents applaud healthcare workers from their balconies, March 15



Emmanuel Macron visits a care home in Paris in March. Covid-19 swept through such institutions

C E

Dubuc, a 35-year-old carer and trade union representative for a group of six public care homes in the northern French port of Le Havre. “Residents died of suffocation.”

Dubuc and others describe chaotic situations in some of France’s 7,400 old people’s homes in March and early April. Masks and other protective equipment were in desperately short supply, staff were sick or absent, very few tests were available and overburdened hospitals sometimes turned away patients. “We were at war, but we had no weapons,” she says. “They let our old people die.” Dubuc believes the Ehpads, an acronym for *établissements d’hébergement pour personnes âgées dépendantes* or institutions to shelter the dependent elderly, “were left to their fate”.

France was among the first countries in Europe to realise the devastation wrought by Covid-19 in old people’s homes. The health authorities began reporting deaths there separately from hospital deaths as early as the end of March. By mid-October, the statistics showed 10,856 of the country’s 33,037 Covid-19 fatalities had died in care homes. The real toll, however, is higher because

**‘We were at war, but we had no weapons. They let our old people die’**

Tatiana Dubuc, carer in public care homes



A market in Marseille in September. The port city has been one of the worst affected by the latest surge in infections

some died in hospital and others were never tested for the virus. In the homes where Dubuc works, she says there have been 92 suspect deaths, of which 50 were confirmed to be from coronavirus.

Olivia Mokiejewski describes how her previously healthy 96-year-old grandmother Hermine, who had looked after her as a child, died in hospital on April 4. She caught the virus in the Bel Air Ehpads near Paris. The institution is run by Korian, a listed company that is the biggest care-home operator in Europe. Mokiejewski and other relatives of residents accuse some staff of failing to take proper preventative measures, hiding Covid-19 infections when they appeared and not looking after the sick adequately.

“It was the conditions they died in, not that they died of Covid, that was the problem,” she says. “These people were abandoned... Covid just unveiled the problems of lack of care and lack of resources in the Ehpads.” Mokiejewski says her grandmother was finally admitted to hospital in a “catastrophic” state. “She was malnourished and dehydrated when she arrived.”

Mokiejewski has now teamed up with 250 families to launch collective lawsuits naming Ehpads they believe neglected their relatives. Fabien Arakelian, her lawyer, says he is handling 40 cases across France. “It’s a real public health scandal, and we’re only at the start,” he says.

Korian declined to respond to specific allegations because of continuing judicial investigations, but acknowledged there were “very serious problems” in various Ehpads and recalled that government protocols did not require the wearing of masks at the start of the epidemic. “There was no medicine [to treat Covid-19], there was no vaccine,” says Jean-Marc Plantade, head of media relations at Korian. “The authorities kept the tests for the hospitals... There were establishments where staff fell ill, in some cases 20 per cent of them in 24 hours. It’s the virus that kills, it’s not Ehpads, it’s not Korian.”

At least two of France’s private care companies, in a healthcare sector that has expanded rapidly in the past three decades, were given early warning of the unfolding global disaster because they had care homes in China. “At the end of January we were warned by our teams that there was a Sars-type disease circulating around Wuhan,” says Jean-Claude Brdenk, chief operating officer of Orpea, the world’s biggest private operator of care homes, which manages an old people’s home south of Wuhan.

Orpea, which has 65,000 staff worldwide, started closing its 240 French Ehpads to visitors more than a week before the government ordered a shutdown. It organised training and protocols, scrambled for supplies of medical equipment and braced itself. “I was thinking it would come from Italy, so I really watched Provence [near the Italian border in southern France], but in the end it came straight to Paris from the east of France,” Brdenk says.

Orpea’s residents were not spared either. It recorded its first positive case on March 12 and says 2,600 of its 18,500 residents in France were infected, of whom 416 died between the beginning of March and the end of July. Since then it has had just 16 coronavirus deaths. Brdenk says the company has so far been the object of no formal legal complaints.

Doctors, carers and government officials insist privately that it is important to put the tragedy ▶



◀ of the pandemic among the elderly in perspective. In a typical year about 180,000 of the 700,000 people in French care homes will die from influenza and other causes. The nation's peak daily death rate during the deadly heatwave of 2003 greatly exceeded the worst days of the coronavirus pandemic in March and April, according to the statistics institute Insee.

The real tragedy for the elderly was twofold: some died gasping for breath because few homes have the oxygen equipment required for seriously ill Covid-19 patients; and survivors, many of them already disoriented or with dementia, have been deprived of family visits and close contact with their carers by measures to stop the spread of the virus.

Opposition politicians and some care home executives have sharply criticised Macron's administration for its handling of the pandemic, including what they say was its narrow focus on hospitals rather than vulnerable old people's homes. Synerpa, the federation representing private care homes, said it received "zero response" when it wrote to then health minister Agnès Buzyn on February 4 making recommendations on how to handle the crisis.

At the Elysée, Macron's advisers accept that there were shortages of equipment and that the government was taken aback by the rapid spread of the epidemic. "All the problems not resolved before Covid exploded during the pandemic," says one official dealing with health policy.

But Macron, they say, was acutely aware of the vulnerability of Ehpads residents. "The president came to me every day and said, 'What is happening in the Ehpads?'" says the official. "The rule was that no Ehpads should be left on its own."

The first severe Covid-19 wave in the spring struck hardest in the east and in the Paris region. Only three weeks after Macron's Ehpads visit, the health authority in the Grand Est region bordering Germany said two-thirds of its 620 old people's homes had been affected by coronavirus and 570 residents had died.

In the latest surge of infections, it is the cities of Paris, Lyons, Marseille and Lille that have so far been worst affected. This time, however, the old people's homes are better equipped and prepared.

Even so, more elderly residents are certain to die from coronavirus. Of the 1,512 Covid-19 active infection "clusters" recorded by the authorities in mid-October, 293 were in Ehpads. "There's a real fear that Covid will return," says Dubuc, the carer in Le Havre.



A Korlan care-home resident on a video call. Covid-19 restrictions meant visitors were not allowed



# GERMANY

GUY CHAZAN IN BERLIN AND  
SAM JONES IN ZURICH

In March, Joachim Missfeldt, head of a Swiss medical supply company, found himself at the centre of a diplomatic crisis. His business, Akzenta, had a commodity Europe desperately needed in those early days of the Covid-19 pandemic - face masks from Asia.

However, much of its stock was stored not in Switzerland but in a warehouse in Freiburg, in south-west Germany. And earlier that month Germany had taken an extraordinary measure to protect its dwindling supplies of PPE. On March 4, Angela Merkel's government banned the export of all protective medical equipment. The order was wide-ranging, from goggles and gowns to gloves and surgical masks. The move left Akzenta unable to supply European customers from its German warehouses. "It was like a bolt from the blue," Missfeldt says. "And a massive slap in the face."

The ban was rushed through amid genuine fears that Germany was about to run out of basic medical supplies, just as the pandemic hit Europe's largest economy with full force. It coincided with other emergency measures, such as an order to hospitals to postpone elective procedures, boost intensive-care capacity and free up beds. But the ban quickly

triggered a massive backlash. German authorities started impounding large consignments of masks and gloves that were being stored in or transited through their territory - even when they had been bought and paid for by other countries.

EU neighbours were outraged. Some accused Berlin of undermining the EU's single market, which Germany had always held up as one of the bloc's greatest achievements. Similar charges were laid when, later the same month, Germany unilaterally closed its western borders, a move that critics said fatally undermined the Schengen passport-free travel zone. It seemed that some of the pillars of European unity were crumbling.

Ever since, Germany has been seeking to undo the damage inflicted by these early measures. It quickly modified and then lifted the export ban. Its hospitals took in 229 Covid-19 patients from France, Italy and the Netherlands. On March 19, Germany delivered 7.5 tonnes of aid to Italy, including ventilators and anaesthetic masks. But to this day, Berlin remains embarrassed by the export stop and the ill-will it caused. "It was very unfortunate," says one senior government official.

That is a view shared by Karl Lauterbach, health spokesman for the Social Democrats and one of the public faces of Germany's emergency response. "In retrospect, it was a mistake," he says. The idea of

## 'You can't fight a pandemic with unilateral action... only through big regional alliances'

Kordula Schulz-Asche, The Greens



The warehouse of a medical equipment storage facility in Apfelstädt, Germany, April 3

building up "autonomy" in supplies of equipment "is always a bad idea when you're dealing with a pandemic, where cross-border co-operation is incredibly important".

"You can't fight a pandemic with unilateral action on a national level - only through big regional alliances, which is what Europe is," says Kordula Schulz-Asche, health spokeswoman for the opposition Greens.

Missfeldt's company specialises in simple medical supplies such as protective aprons, dental chair covers, exam table drapes and face coverings. In early March, it had plenty of the goods that hospitals and doctors were crying out for but Missfeldt was at a loss as to how to react. Warned by lawyers that the ban could stay in force for months, he started selling his products at giveaway prices to German firms. "It was economic lunacy," he says.

One customer affected was Dispotech, a supplier of medical disposable products. The company is based in Gordona, about 100km from Bergamo, one of the early centres of the pandemic. Demand for masks was going through the roof.

With Dispotech and others left in the lurch, the export restriction threatened a crisis in German-Italian relations. Akzenta's customers complained to the Italian embassy in Berlin and a diplomat rang Missfeldt. "He was hassling me like mad, accusing

us of holding up deliveries," he recalls. "I told him there was nothing we could do."

The German blockade, which was imposed just as Russia, Cuba and China were sending emergency aid to Lombardy, fuelled a sense that Italy was being abandoned in its hour of need by its closest allies. There was fury too at Germany's refusal to countenance "coronabonds" as a way to save Europe's ravaged economy. "In the land of Angela Merkel, who boasts the title of Europe's leader, the community spirit is dying," wrote Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* on March 13.

One incident grabbed public attention: two days after Berlin's ban came into effect, a lorry containing 240,000 protective masks was seized by German officials before it could cross the Swiss border. It was one of many such hold-ups. Swiss officials worried that the country might run out of equipment. "We weren't far from [doctors and nurses wearing] garbage bags, like we saw in the US," says one.

German MPs quickly became aware of the damage the ban was inflicting. Hearing of Akzenta's difficulties, Marian Wendt, an MP from Merkel's CDU/CSU bloc, appealed to the German health ministry on Missfeldt's behalf. "It was important for me to try to preserve the peace in Europe," he says. "A big conflict was brewing, with the Italians saying the Germans are taking our masks away."

Pressure was also coming from Switzerland, where the authorities launched an urgent diplomatic effort to reverse the blockade. In Bern, the government summoned the German ambassador, Otto Lampe, to complain. Switzerland's ambassador to Berlin also registered concerns.

The efforts worked: a call was brokered between Merkel and Simonetta Sommaruga, the Swiss president. Germany's chancellor promised to lift the restrictions on exports to Switzerland as soon as possible. On March 12, Berlin modified the ban, allowing for various exemptions. Finally, a week later, it scrapped it completely. But that was only after the European Commission on March 15 banned exports of all medical equipment from the EU single market to third countries.

Germany's decision to close its western borders took much longer to reverse, even though it elicited a similarly angry response. Other EU states were stunned by the move - especially as Merkel had previously argued against unilateral actions to stop the disease. Days before the border closure, she said that EU countries "should not be isolating [themselves] from each other" and that they needed to adopt a "unified approach that is, as far as possible, co-ordinated [between us]".

Now ministers privately admit that the closures might have been the wrong response. "Look what happened on our border with Poland, where we had 60km queues of lorries," said the senior government official. "The EU single market was severely disrupted - and we can't let that happen again."

Schulz-Asche, the Green MP, says the closures were "completely inappropriate": "When you shut borders, social, professional and economic contacts collapse." Instead, Germany should have stepped up cross-border co-operation with health authorities in neighbouring countries.

Asked in late August whether the closures would be reintroduced if there was a fresh surge in coronavirus cases, Merkel ruled them out. "The situation is such that we want to react in a much more regional way," she said. "We don't intend to resort to extensive closures again."

More broadly, Merkel has been prepared to admit that Germany's approach was, at least in the first stage of the crisis, too "national". In a speech on June 18, she said the pandemic had exposed "how fragile the European project still is". "The first reflexes, our own included, were rather national and not consistently European."

Speaking before an official trip to Italy in September, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German president, acknowledged that Germany had "experienced, as if by reflex, a retreat inwards". But it had quickly learnt its lesson. "Very soon we realised that no country could defeat the virus on its own," he said. "In Europe, aid and support must not stop at borders - borders that are now almost forgotten."



Trucks parked near the Swiss border on March 16 after Germany announced border controls



# THE EU



**SAM FLEMING IN BRUSSELS,  
GUY CHAZAN IN BERLIN AND  
VICTOR MALLET IN PARIS**

**E**mmanuel Macron was being kept guessing. After weeks of assiduous courtship, the French president did not know for sure, as May 18 dawned, how big a leap his political partner Angela Merkel was willing to make to arrest the downward spiral of confidence in the EU and its handling of the pandemic.

In the event, the scale of the shock-and-awe commitment Merkel made alongside the French leader that day stunned not only global financial markets but politicians across Europe. After a frenzied weekend of technical preparations and secret talks, Merkel joined Macron in urging the EU to borrow €500bn to hand out as grants for Europe's economic recovery from the crisis.

The decision was described later by Macron as "the most important since the creation of the euro". It ran roughshod over Germany's traditional opposition to large-scale joint borrowing and re-energised the core Franco-German alliance that drives the European project.

Coronavirus was not just a grave threat to lives and livelihoods, it was also a danger to the EU itself. It risked throwing into reverse many of the bloc's most cherished achievements and destroying a spirit of solidarity, its lifeblood. It took a remarkable act of leadership to turn peril into opportunity.

With many EU countries struggling to contain a second wave of infection, following through is all the more important. However, a final agreement on the recovery fund has yet to be sealed and capitals remain divided over how to attach rule-of-law safeguards. Even if a deal is reached, much will depend on how governments spend the money in the years ahead.

"We were facing the risk of a crisis that could blow up the European Union," says Johannes Hahn, the EU's budget commissioner. "This initiative the European Council agreed to in July can really be a game-changer, but it all depends on how well we implement it. We are by no means through."

The backdrop to May's joint announcement was the darkest period for European co-operation since the bloc's foundation. The early weeks of the outbreak were marked by a series of uncoordinated border closures, bans on exports of some medical products, interruptions to flows of goods through the single market and a leaden-footed response by EU authorities.

What made matters worse was a feeling in the hardest-hit member states, including Italy and Spain, that the EU was indifferent to the appalling human toll the crisis was imposing on their populations. "There was a perception that Europe was missing," recalls one senior EU official. "The mood

## 'We were facing the risk of a crisis that could blow up the European Union'

Johannes Hahn, EU budget commissioner



The French-Italian border on June 3, the day Italy reopened its frontiers with Europe

was horrible - particularly in Italy. [The crisis] was being blamed on the EU, and it was threatening the euro and the single market."

Manfred Weber, the head of the centre-right European People's Party alliance in the European Parliament, says Europe "failed totally" in its early attempts to manage the crisis, as countries scrambled to look after their own interests. In his native Germany, he says, the recognition began to dawn that something had to change - and quickly. "We realised that we cannot have a recovery in our own economy without a recovery in the single market as a whole."

Some measures had been taken earlier in the crisis. In mid-March, the European Central Bank made the decision to purchase an extra €750bn of bonds and in April the EU approved a €540bn package of emergency assistance. But the latter was almost entirely composed of loans. While this would previously have been seen in Germany as more than generous, finance ministry officials in

Berlin were beginning to question the country's conservative approach.

Germany had for years enjoyed bumper budget surpluses, allowing it to splurge on emergency aid for its businesses. Countries such as Italy and Spain were fiscally hamstrung, raising the spectre of a worsening north-south economic divide that could tear the EU apart. "We realised we needed to show solidarity," says one senior official.

This recognition underpinned increasingly close Franco-German co-ordination at the highest level, with Merkel in frequent contact with Macron, and Olaf Scholz, the German finance minister, liaising closely with his French counterpart, Bruno Le Maire.

French officials are at pains to point out that Macron had been courting a reluctant Merkel on the issue of a common EU budget since he came to power in 2017. "It wasn't three weeks or three phone calls but three years," says a senior French official involved in the discussions.

What remained unclear until late April was the central role the commission would ultimately play. During the sovereign debt crisis a decade ago, member states opted to leave the crisis-fighting firepower to non-EU institutions including the Luxembourg-based European Stability Mechanism.

This time, however, the commission managed to insert itself at the heart of the response. What helped their plan gain acceptance, says one senior EU diplomat, was the strong personal relationship between the German commission president Ursula von der Leyen and her political patron Merkel, as well as Macron, who last year backed her candidacy for the post. "In the last crisis they didn't trust the commission," says the senior diplomat.

Merkel ultimately agreed to the commission raising debt and paying it out to member states as grants, but the Social Democrats in the German finance ministry had to concede that the recovery fund would be a one-off. That allowed Merkel to sell the idea to her CDU/CSU bloc.

Macron was also forced to compromise - and repeatedly. He had initially backed the idea of coronabonds issued jointly by the eurozone member states, something opposed by Berlin.

Then when the recovery fund was first broached, he saw it as a separate entity, but Merkel wanted it within the framework of the EU budget. Eventually, he assented.

French officials involved in the negotiations say that Merkel only gave her formal support to the €500bn in grants - a number that emphasised the scale of the necessary recovery plan - on the morning of her May declaration with Macron.

It took until late July for the EU to ultimately agree a deal, comprising €390bn of grants and €360bn in loans, but French officials see the Merkel-Macron announcement as the turning point in the crisis. "It was a total game-changer," says one.

As coronavirus ripped through Europe in the spring of 2020, it exposed national frailties in terms of a lack of pandemic preparation, slow decision-making and rivalries between central and regional governments. With a second wave of infection now in full swing, many governments are under severe strain once again.

By taking a leap towards closer fiscal union, the EU has emerged stronger than many might have feared seven months ago. But much will depend on how a reinvigorated Franco-German partnership weathers the coming trials - not least because Merkel is in the twilight of her chancellorship. Ensuring the recovery fund is well-spent will be a formidable bureaucratic and political challenge.

"Honestly, nobody knows at this stage if this financial aid or support will be sufficient," says Hahn. "For the moment I think yes. But it needs to be implemented well, and lead to genuine change in the way many of these countries run their economies. There is still a huge political burden on Europe's shoulders." **FT**

## Coronavirus: could the world have been spared?

This article is part of an FT series in which we examine what went wrong - and right - as Covid-19 spread across the world. Read more at [ft.com/coronavirus-investigation](https://ft.com/coronavirus-investigation)



Netherlands prime minister Mark Rutte; German chancellor Angela Merkel; president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen; and France's President Emmanuel Macron at an EU summit on July 18



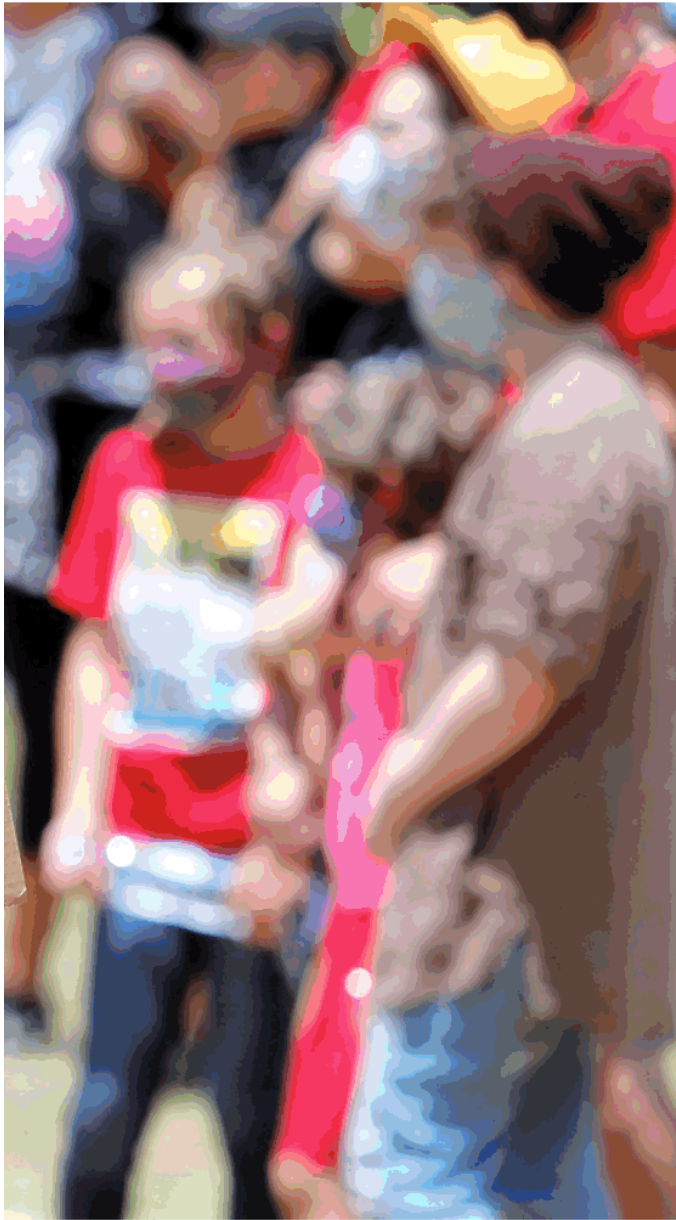


# Will Texas turn blue?

The Lone Star state has been staunchly Republican for decades. But rapidly shifting demographics and a newfound grassroots energy offer a fresh chance for Democrats this November.

Ambitions range from flipping the state House of Representatives to a larger presidential upset.

*Demetri Sevastopulo* reports on a moment that could reshape national politics



# T

he first time Sima Ladjevardian experienced a political revolution, she was 12 years old and sitting in a classroom in Tehran in the middle of what felt like an earthquake. "Everything was shaking," she says, recalling the uprising that engulfed Iran four decades ago and led to the country's Islamic republic. "We all came out and it was a sea of people throwing acid into the school and shooting guns in the air. Very scary."

There had been whispers at home about the dangers of the revolution. Ladjevardian's grandmother had helped women secure the right to vote and then become a member of parliament. Her father was also an MP at the time. But after that eventful day, those rumours turned into a harsh reality when her mother told her and her brother that they would go to Paris - just for a short while. "I had a really weird premonition that we were just never gonna go back," she says.

She was right. Her family spent two years in France, before moving to California to pursue the American dream. As a teenager, Ladjevardian perfected her English by watching *Star Wars*. Now 54, she talks to me from Houston, Texas, where in next month's US elections she will embark on her own political quest with the Democratic party: she is campaigning to oust Dan Crenshaw, a freshman Republican in the second congressional district in Texas.

The turning point for Ladjevardian was watching Donald Trump win the White House in 2016. "That night when Trump won, I honestly had so much anxiety and flashbacks to everything that had happened in my life, to kind of thinking, 'Oh my god, there's going to be a revolution in this country,'" she says, explaining that she felt Trump had given licence to people to be racist and xenophobic. There was only one answer. "I decided to get more involved."

Four years later, Ladjevardian is one of many Democratic candidates in Texas hoping to convert anti-Trump sentiment into victories

at the state and national level on November 3. Women are at the forefront of this push - from MJ Hegar, a retired Air Force pilot who is taking aim at Senator John Cornyn, to those such as Natali Hurtado and Keke Williams, who are fighting for seats in the Texas House of Representatives - the lower house of the state legislature.

Expectations for their party are rising. Joe Biden, the Democrat presidential candidate, is trailing Trump in Texas by just four points and has invested several million dollars there to boost his campaign and help other races. Democrats are also raising record amounts of money, helping to return the Lone Star state to serious battleground status for the first time in years. The Ladjevardian-Crenshaw fight is the eighth most expensive congressional contest of the 435 races this November.

Republicans in the state take the threat seriously. Steve Munisteri, former head of the Texas Republican party, says: "We have to treat it like the largest competitive state in the union. Democrats are pouring a lot of money into the state, but Republicans are not." Yet the former Trump White House official, who is advising Cornyn in his race, says the Republican National Committee is convinced that "Texas is pretty solid" for them, even if he thinks the president is only "slightly ahead".

Such optimism stems from the fact that Democrats have long fared badly in Texas. The south-western state is critical due to its 38 electoral college votes - the second-highest after California - but no Democratic presidential candidate has won there since Jimmy Carter in 1976. It has not elected a Democratic senator or governor since 1990.

Over the past two decades, Republicans have also held sway over the redistricting of congressional seats that follows each US census. This is partly due to their majority hold on the Texas House of Representatives since 2002, after more than a century of Democratic domination. In 2003 and 2013, Texas congressional districts were redrawn in a way that helped Republicans control a large majority of the state's 36 congressional seats.

During 2018's midterm elections, however, Democrats saw hopeful signs that they could become a force in Texas again. In a campaign that took the state by storm and catapulted him on to the national stage, Beto O'Rourke, a former El Paso lawmaker, came very close to ousting Ted Cruz, the former Republican presidential contender, in the Senate race. The energy that he ►



◀ helped create has continued, feeding on a growing sense of opposition to Trump over everything from the president's handling of Covid-19 to his sowing of division over race.

But Democrats are most excited about the possibility that years of rapid demographic change could now return them to a strong foothold in Texas. That would energise the party and dramatically help fundraising. It would also increase the chances of future Democratic presidential candidates winning the state, a development with huge consequences for Republican prospects of taking the White House and one that could change American politics for a generation.

Ladjevardian encapsulates many of the trends in play. After graduating from law school in California three decades ago, she moved with her husband to Houston, which was then 40 per cent white. Recent census estimates suggest that the share of white residents has now fallen below 25 per cent. Months after Trump took office, she joined the O'Rourke Senate campaign, mobilising local voters. "This area is probably one of the most diverse counties in the nation... [But] the fact that not everybody was necessarily politically involved was a big deal," she says.

O'Rourke dropped out of the Democratic presidential race last November. But Ladjevardian was spurred to further action the following month, when Crenshaw voted against a bill that would have lowered drug prices - breaking a campaign promise. Ladjevardian was furious, partly because her own experience of breast cancer had taught her about healthcare costs. She decided to run against Crenshaw. "I came in literally the last hour of the day that you could declare," she says. "I just thought to myself, this country has given me so much... If I don't actually step up and do this, I would never forgive myself. I would never even be able to look at my kids."

The Ladjevardian-Crenshaw race is still one of the tougher targets for Democrats. Crenshaw is a former Navy Seal who wears a patch over the eye he lost in Afghanistan. A strong fundraiser, he was the only Texas Republican invited to speak at the Republican National Convention in August. Munisteri says it is "not out of the realm of possibility" that Ladjevardian could win, but that a victory for her would signify a "big wave" for Democrats.

Whatever the result, the Democrats will probably struggle to make a



## 'My entire focus for this past year has been on the state House. There's nothing more important for the future of this country'

**Beto O'Rourke, former congressman**

large dent in the 22-13 advantage that the Texas Republicans have in the US House of Representatives, because of the way districts are drawn. Their main target, however, is the Texas House of Representatives. Having flipped 12 seats out of its 150 in 2018, Democrats need just nine more to win the majority.

O'Rourke is heavily involved in these campaigns. After withdrawing from the presidential contest, he formed a group called Powered by People that is mobilising Democrats to vote in the state House races. For him, these are the contests that matter most in the long term. Control of the state legislature would give Democrats more influence over the next redistricting, which will see Texas gain more congressional seats because of its expanding population. The state will also secure a corresponding increase in its electoral college votes, making it even more important in future presidential races.

"My entire focus for this past year, with every breath in my body and every waking minute of the day, has been on the state House," O'Rourke tells me on the phone after returning from two days campaigning in north Texas. "There's nothing more important for the future of this country."



Above top: late President George Bush with his wife Barbara in 1966 - he began his political career in Harris County and helped turn Texas into a Republican stronghold. Above: no Democratic presidential candidate has won the state since Jimmy Carter in 1976

One of the candidates that Powered by People is promoting is Natali Hurtado, who is contesting a seat in Houston. Ladjevardian tells me that Hurtado is a "big fighter", and when I reach the 36-year-old, I see what she means. Hurtado's mother came from Honduras and received political asylum. Her father, a sailor from Uruguay, left his ship in New York. Hurtado was raised in Houston. When she was 19 and still in college, her parents, who came from conservative backgrounds, presented her with an ultimatum over the boyfriend she had been with for four months: "Get married or break up."

They got married and one year later Hurtado gave birth to a daughter. But one day, after she had dropped her husband off at work, her life came crashing down. "I received a call from a detective who said my husband had been involved in a crime before we married," she says.

The crime was murder and her husband received two life sentences. "It made me a young single mother overnight," Hurtado says. Back with her parents, she survived with the help of food stamps and Medicaid, the federal health insurance programme for low-income Americans. But she also graduated college, winning an internship in a congressional office in Washington as Barack Obama came to power. "That was a life-changing moment," she tells me. "It was when I decided that I wanted to become a public servant."

In 2015, Hurtado moved to northwest Houston with her new husband. When Donald Trump was elected president, she had the same reaction as Ladjevardian. "The question was, 'Had I done enough to make sure that it didn't happen?', and the answer was no," she says. "I was six months pregnant and decided that I was going to run for office."

In 2018, Hurtado ran for the Texas House against Republican candidate Sam Harless. She lost but stayed optimistic, reasoning that demographic changes would make the Houston district a riper target. Once 60 per cent white, Hurtado says, it is now majority-minority, with Latinos accounting for almost a quarter of the residents. It is precisely that kind of change that is putting Democrats in a stronger position across big cities in Texas.

As the centre of the US oil industry, Houston had been a magnet for white workers. But that trend halted abruptly after 1982 when oil prices collapsed. This helped turn it into one of the cheapest big cities in America, as Stephen Klineberg, a Rice University expert on state demographic trends, explains. Today, it is

the poster child for US demographic change, as younger and more ethnically diverse Texans – some born in the state and others from elsewhere – overtake older, more conservative voters. As Klineberg puts it: “This southern city, which was dominated and controlled by white men, is now the most ethnically diverse city in the country.”

Harris County, home to Houston and the third most populous county in the US, was 63 per cent “Anglo” in 1980, according to Klineberg. Black people made up one-fifth of the population, Hispanic people 16 per cent and Asian people 2 per cent. According to the 2010 census, Hispanic Texans were the largest ethnic group at 41 per cent, while the percentage of white people almost halved. That trend will only have continued when the 2020 census results are released.

Yet while the demographic trend favours Democrats, the party has not been able to convert that into big national victories. One reason that they have not always been able to capitalise on population changes is that voter turnout in Texas is frequently the worst in the country. Democrats attribute that to voter suppression, but some say the party also has to take some of the blame. As Hurtado has campaigned over the past two years, she has frequently heard the same refrain: “I’ve lived here for 20 or 30 years and nobody has asked for my vote.”

She believes O’Rourke started to change that dynamic in 2017 by travelling to all 254 counties in Texas to reach voters, many of whom had long been ignored. “I started seeing people I had never seen in my life going to political events,” Hurtado says. “Younger folk were excited because he was relatable.”

Last week, O’Rourke organised a virtual phone bank with Oprah Winfrey which reached 2.9 million Texans over 24 hours. He says other groups, such as the Texas Organizing Project, which is working to get disengaged voters in communities of colour to vote, have also made a huge difference. After our call, he texts me a link to a video of Winfrey calling a man named Christian who exclaims “holy smoke!” before telling her that he is going to vote at 8am the next day – the first day of Texas’s early voting.

That same day, Harris County, which Hillary Clinton won in 2016, saw record turnout. For O’Rourke this underscores an often-ignored point about the 2020 race. He says the focus on whether Biden can win back the white rust-belt voters who went for Trump overlooks a much bigger story. “The real story is that you’ve got all these amazing voters ▶

## ‘I just thought to myself, this country has given me so much... If I don’t actually step up and do this, I would never forgive myself’

Sima Ladjevardian, Democratic candidate, US House of Representatives



PORTRAIT BY RAHIM FORTUNE



# After Trump was elected, 'the question was, "Had I done enough to make sure that it didn't happen?", and the answer was no'

Natali Hurtado, Democratic candidate, Texas House of Representatives



PORTRAIT BY RAHIM FORTUNE

◀ in communities of colour who are showing up in record numbers in what had been the lowest voter turnout state in the country, and one that had to contend with the worst voter suppression laws in the country," O'Rourke says. "That's what is so exciting about this moment."

Candice Quarles, an African-American Dallas councilwoman, tells me that young black voters have also been energised following the killing of George Floyd, a black man who grew up in Houston, by a white police officer and the fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor in Kentucky. "There was a lot of first-time activism this summer," she says. "Young voters of colour are taking that to the polls."

Another group trying to get Texans to the polls is Voto Latino, the biggest Hispanic voter registration group in the US, which is spending \$8m-\$10m in the state. Illustrating their potential voting power, Klineberg told me that 51 per cent of Harris County residents under the age of 20 were Latino. Voto Latino's president, María Teresa Kumar, says Texas is "in play" because young Hispanics are angry at Republicans over their immigration stance.

"You have a slew of candidates who are young and hungry and grassroots activists who are mobilising," she says, adding that her group ended up registering 267,000 Texans, far above their goal of 190,000. Kumar says many Latinos are reacting to a Texas anti-immigrant law passed in 2017 that echoes a move in California in 1994 to deny public benefits to illegal immigrants. Pete Wilson, the California Republican governor at the time, attached himself to Proposition 187. It passed and he won re-election, but the measure energised Latino voters and crippled the Republican party, which has not won the state in a presidential race since 1988. Kumar, who grew up in California, says: "Texas is Pete Wilson on steroids."

Steve Munisteri has a different take on Texas's demographic question. He says Democrats have long benefited from urban trends and stresses that Trump is actually doing better with Hispanics in the state than Cruz did two years ago and Mitt Romney did in 2012 when he lost to Barack Obama. "The state has never been as rock-solid Republican as people think," says Munisteri, adding the real problem for Trump is not so much the demographic changes, but more that he is losing white people and particularly white women. He adds that people tend to forget that Trump scraped by with only 52 per cent in Texas four years ago.

Dave Carney, a political adviser to Texas Republican governor Greg Abbott, agrees the presidential race is “tight”, but stresses there is “zero chance” Democrats will win a majority in the Texas House, pointing out that O’Rourke far outspent Cruz but still lost. For Carney, the idea that demographic changes only help Democrats is a fallacy; he cites the fact that Abbott won 42 per cent of the Hispanic vote when he was re-elected two years ago. “If demographics were destiny, we would already be a Democratic state,” adds Carney, who served as White House director of political affairs for President George Bush. “The Democrats are always too optimistic. It happens every two years in Texas. It has always been the same meme, that this time it will happen.”

Munisteri says while the Trump campaign and national Republicans are not investing heavily, the Texas Republican party has raised plenty of money “from Texans to Texans”. He adds: “We already assume there are no reinforcements coming, so we’re geared up for battle.”

In 2016, Trump won 227 of the 254 counties in Texas, but the Democrats won the major cities: Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin and El Paso. While the rural congressional districts are generally much tougher for Democrats, they are hoping for some success there this year. Gina Ortiz Jones, a gay former Air Force intelligence officer raised by a single mother from the Philippines, is running in the 23rd district, which stretches over 800km along the border with Mexico from El Paso to San Antonio. It is one of the swing battlegrounds after the Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that the redrawing of the district violated the Voting Rights Act. Two years ago, Ortiz Jones lost by 926 votes to Will Hurd, a former CIA officer. Now she faces Tony Gonzales, a former US Navy cryptologist who, like her, is an Iraq war veteran.

Echoing both Ladjvardian and Hurtado, Ortiz Jones says healthcare is a huge issue. That is partly because of the pandemic; when we spoke, she had just returned from Eagle Pass, a city on the border where the Covid-19 positivity rate is almost 22 per cent (compared with the national rate of 5.4 per cent and a rate of 7.1 per cent for Texas). But it is also because Trump and the Republicans are trying to gut Obamacare legislation. Texas is the least insured state in the US and this could have an oversized impact on election day.

Ortiz Jones adds that Texas is also a battleground partly because Repub-



## ‘If demographics were destiny, we would already be a Democratic state’

Dave Carney, political adviser

lican women are angry at how Trump has handled the pandemic. “The fact that [women] are having to stay at home, work from home, the fact that their kids are not in classrooms, the fact that this economic recovery has also impacted their ability to return to work - these are the types of things that I am hearing about from voters,” she tells me.

Sherri Greenberg, a former Texas House representative and now professor at the University of Texas in Austin, agrees with Ortiz Jones that women are suffering more than men in the economic downturn, and are concerned about healthcare as they lose insurance attached to their jobs. “The suburbs are changing and women are getting out there and voting. There are more women candidates and if they support the issues you care about that helps.” A recent Washington Post/ABC poll found that Joe Biden had a 23-point advantage with women - far higher than Hillary Clinton’s edge in 2016.

When I first spoke to Greenberg in July, she was sceptical that demographic changes would help the Democrats win in Texas. “You can talk to me until the cows come home, but demographics don’t vote,” she said at the time. But she has watched the amount of money that the party has raised with amazement.



From top: people line up to cast their ballots in Houston; Air Force veteran Gina Ortiz Jones is the Democratic nominee for the 23rd district, one of the state’s swing battlegrounds; Candice Quarles with her daughter - the Dallas councilwoman says young voters of colour have been energised by racial justice activism

Scott Braddock, editor of Quorum Report, a Texas politics newsletter, says the current situation reminds him of the Republican effort in 2002 to win the state House. “It’s that aggressive,” he says. But it’s also a sign of how big a challenge it will be. “A majority victory isn’t possible unless they win in some of those unexpected places,” says Braddock.

The Texas Democratic party is targeting 22 Texas House districts - nine where O’Rourke beat Cruz and 13 where he lost with a margin of less than 10 points. In one district that is home to the Fort Hood military base, Keke Williams, a black retired army captain, is trying to oust Brad Buckley. Just before my call with O’Rourke, I read that Williams said she had raised more than \$330,000 in seven weeks. O’Rourke says it is “phenomenal” that the veteran has raised so much money in an area that “is not a liberal bastion”.

Williams later tells me that her district too has become more diverse, mirroring the changes seen in the big cities. That has contributed to her strong fundraising, which has been powered by small donations. She believes Trump is deflecting attention from key issues such as healthcare and education. “This is not a reality TV show, these are people’s lives at stake,” Williams says.

For Braddock, the combination of fundraising, shifting demographics and growing concern about Trump among suburban Republicans means Texas is really in play for the first time in a long time. “The feeling right now is that the Texas House majority is a coin flip.”

What if the Democrats win? “I think there’s a certain poetic and political justice that the defeat of the most openly racist, nativist president in our history will be delivered by an electorate that is the most diverse in the country,” says O’Rourke. He argues that taking Texas would also allow Biden to fend off any effort by Trump to claim he had not lost the election. Ladjvardian puts it more colloquially: “If we get the 38 electoral votes, it’s game over.”

Klineberg does not think that the Democrats will win the Texas House or White House this year. But he believes demographics will eventually catch up with the Republicans, and stresses that when they do, the stakes are existential, since the GOP has no path to victory in the presidential race without Texas. “If the Republicans lose Texas, that is the end of the Republican party,” he says. **FT**

Demetri Sevastopulo is the FT’s Washington bureau chief





ABOVE: ANNUAL FAIR ON THE NIEUWMARKT, AMSTERDAM, 1961 (FROM THE BOOK *FEEST*)  
RIGHT: ED VAN DER ELSKEN SELF-PORTRAIT WITH ATA KANDO BEFORE THE MIRROR IN THEIR FLAT IN PARIS, 1952



In 1959, the Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken and his wife Gerda van der Veen set off to travel halfway around the world. They crossed Africa and south-east Asia to Hong Kong, the Philippines and Japan, sailed across the Pacific to Los Angeles, where they bought a "big, classy, light-blue convertible", then drove south to Mexico, back through the southern US to Pennsylvania and, finally, to New York, from where they sailed home.

As he travelled, Van der Elsken developed his film in makeshift darkrooms and sold his photographs to magazines. He made a documentary for a shipping company, wrote the script for a television film and had more than enough material for his next project. "We broke precisely even on what we'd earned and what we spent," he wrote later. "But we'd seen life - sweet life - all over the world. Then we made a baby and a book."

The book was *Sweet Life* - his personal record of the 14-month trip. He designed, edited and laid it out himself and wrote an essay to go with it. Several of the African countries he visited were on the brink of independence, and he describes his encounters with people from different cultures with a mix of guilt, scepticism and a generally liberal hope for a better future.

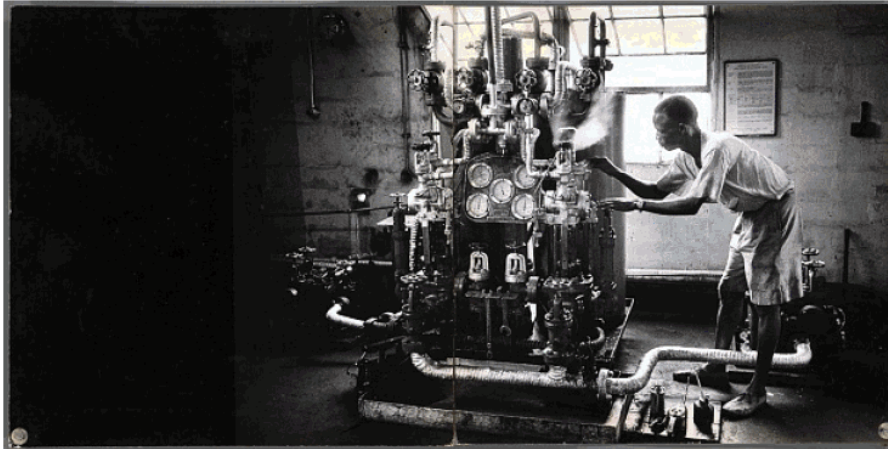
Visually, the book exudes energy and excitement, even a kind of innocence from the pleasure of his discovery of the ▶

## WHEN LIFE WAS SWEET

ED VAN DER ELSKEN IS THE NETHERLANDS' MOST IMPORTANT POSTWAR PHOTOGRAPHER. WHEN THE RIJKSMUSEUM ACQUIRED HIS ARCHIVE, 30 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, IT DISCOVERED PLANS FOR A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN BOOK. A NEW EXHIBITION REVEALS ALL. BY LIZ JOBEY







MAN AT MACHINE, NIGERIA, 1959  
(FROM THE BOOK *SWEET LIFE*)  
BELOW: CONTACT SHEET OF SAINT-GERMAIN-DES-PRÉS, PARIS 1950-54  
RIGHT: ARTIST AND MUSE VALI MYERS IN A CAFÉ, PARIS, 1950-54  
(FROM *LOVE ON THE LEFT BANK*)

◀ world that, in this era of formal, art-market-ready picture-making, might be considered old-fashioned. People are relentlessly in motion - running, stooping, begging, jostling, fighting, dancing, kissing, stripping, animated in conversation as the photographer passes by.

Visitors to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam will be able to get a sense of this energy in an exhibition devoted to Van der Elsen that opens this month. It comes a year after the museum and the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam jointly acquired his entire archive, which, since his death from cancer in 1990, at the age of 65, had been cared for by his widow, Anneke Hilhorst.

Initially, she had approached them with only one item, “but a very important one”, says Hans Rooseboom, a photography curator at the Rijksmuseum. It was the last remaining maquette, or “dummy”, for *Sweet Life*. “Everyone in the field knew there was one maquette that was still with her. The others were already in a public collection... When we visited her, we were shown other items, and the idea naturally arose that maybe we should consider acquiring the complete estate.”

Rooseboom says *Sweet Life*'s energy also comes from the way Van der Elsen positioned and sequenced the pictures on the page. It took him six years to find a publisher. When it was to be printed in Japan, Van der Elsen went back to supervise, “advising the printers on how much black ink to use - more than a printer wants or dares to use,” Rooseboom says, “because he was very specific in his ideas about how to print a book”.

Although Van der Elsen's name might not be so familiar to audiences outside his native country, inside it he is considered the most famous postwar Dutch photographer. Since his death, international interest in his work has grown, and today he is often placed alongside two other great postwar photographers, Robert Frank and William Klein. Like them, he cared little for convention - including the conventions of his own trade. Van der Elsen's work was spontaneous, subjective, aesthetically adventurous and resistant to standard commercial use. Though he sold pictures to magazines, this was not his primary purpose as an artist and he reserved much of his best work for his books.

People were what fascinated him and they are almost exclusively what he photographed. Like Frank and Klein, he moved into film, restlessly segueing between the two art forms, spending periods as a documentary film-maker, sometimes as director, sometimes cameraman, ending with *Bye* (1990), a moving film account of his terminal illness.

His first book, *Love on the Left Bank*, a photo-novel set in the bars and cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés based on the years he spent in Paris in the early 1950s, was much loved and cited by younger artists as an influence. The artist Nan Goldin, in 2017, described seeing the book for the first time. “The feeling ▶





**'Van der Elsken's work was spontaneous, subjective, aesthetically adventurous and resistant to standard commercial use'**



◀ was similar to that of meeting a lover or that I had found a brother," she wrote. "Somehow he was able to document life in the truest way... always finding beauty and staying connected to the otherwise mundane... He never seemed to be an outsider."

The nascent poet-musician Patti Smith, aged 20, picked up "a battered copy" from a used-book stall in Philadelphia in 1967: "These images, shot in the '50s by Ed van der Elskén, melded the documentary with art. I carried them within me as I ventured into new territory and a new life," she told Vanity Fair.

His archive contains about 8,000 prints but its most valuable assets are probably the 3,000 contact sheets – the one-to-one positives that correspond to the negatives – that the photographer used as an index and as a working tool. "It is estimated that he made around 100,000 images and these are on the contact sheets that he used," Rooseboom says. "They contain all kinds of markings and stickers and they are really brilliant to look at. Then there are his designs for book covers, some of the maquettes, including the one for *Sweet Life*, all kinds of working prints, print variants."

The show uses this material to explain his working practice, says Rooseboom. "In the exhibition, we have included some printed pages from an unbound copy of *Sweet Life*. We show them next to the photographic prints that he made in his darkroom, next to the contact prints, next to the final proof prints and the working prints, just to follow a few of his choices in cropping and reversing the image, for example." He wants the show to make visitors realise "that a print is not just a print".

**O**

ne of the biggest surprises in the archive was the discovery of an unfinished book. "I think hardly anyone had ever seen it," Rooseboom says. "It was left incomplete, and we don't know much about it, but it was meant as a book, for sure. There was a cover design and an annotation that it should contain 64 pages."

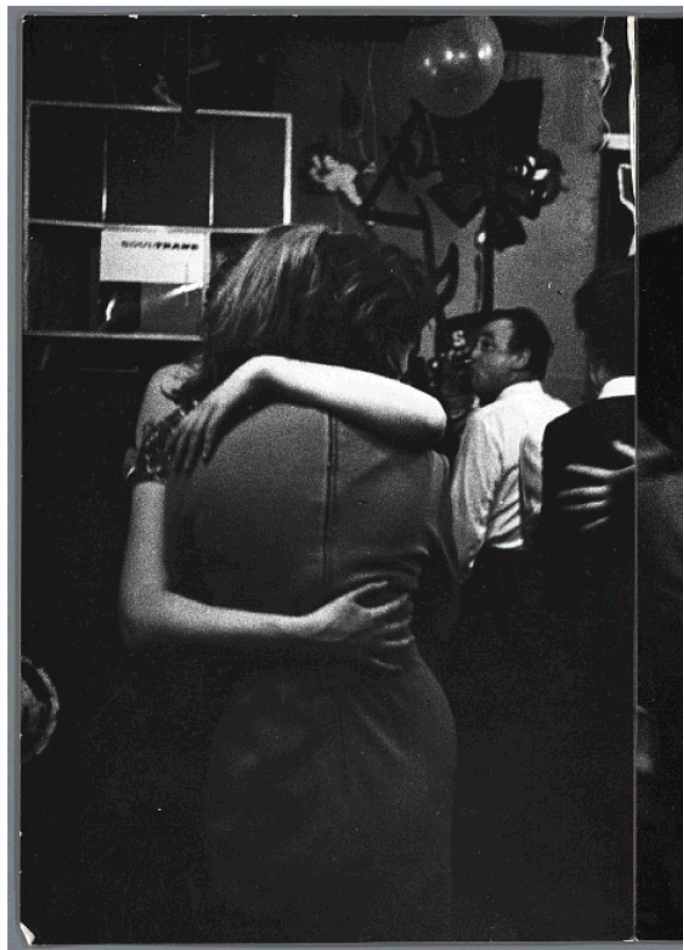
The title is *Feest* (Party) and the book is a collection of Van der Elskén's pictures taken at carnivals, festivals, clubs, concert halls and public functions, including the state visit of the Queen and Prince Phillip to The Hague in 1958. It mixes pictures from Amsterdam and Paris, the majority dating between 1950 and 1961 – soon after he returned from his travels. "We can only speculate on why he left it aside," Rooseboom says. Maybe it was interrupted by planning for the world trip and, once he got back, *Sweet Life* took over as his priority.

Whatever the explanation, it presented the two museums with an ideal way to mark the acquisition of the estate, and they decided to publish the book in time for the exhibition opening. They also decided to include all the *Feest* photographs he had selected, more than would have fitted into 64 pages.

These include some images that the editors – Rooseboom and his fellow curator, Mattie Boom – have been careful to concede are "problematic" and which display what would now be seen as racist or sexist behaviour by some of the party-goers: a male photographer snapping away at a scantily dressed model in Paris in 1953; a man dressed in female Afro-Surinamese costume at the Jordaan neighbourhood festival in Amsterdam in 1955. The curators say that it is the museum's duty to "provide proper context for historical objects and events... The task of a museum is to make discussion possible, not to avoid it."

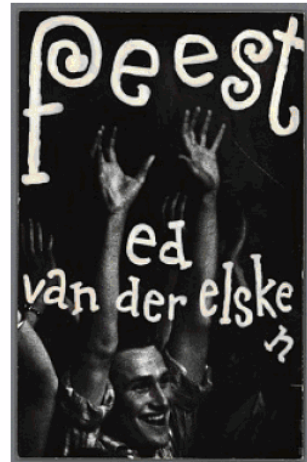
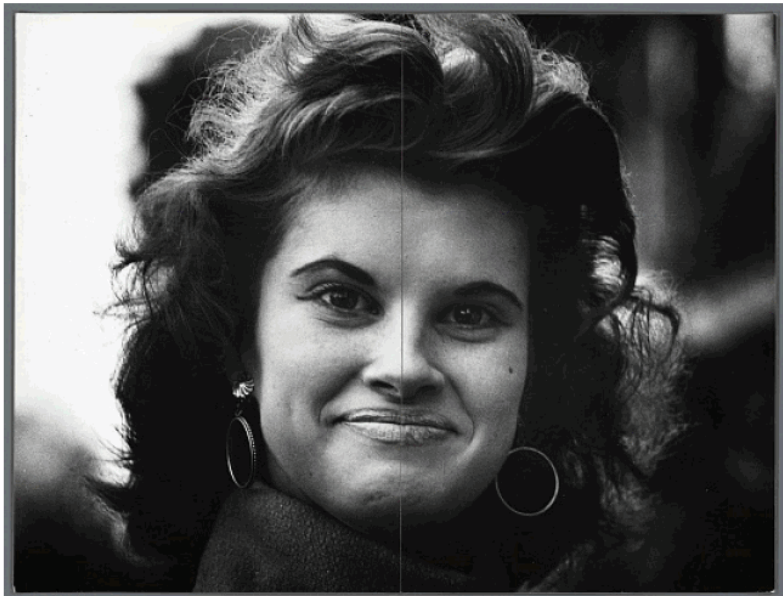
"The exhibition is really a first step," Rooseboom says. "A lot of questions still stand but will be answered in the upcoming few years when we are able to compare all the sources in our public collections... You have to do your research properly and to see how many riddles you can solve, how many questions you can answer. It's a big puzzle." **PT**

"Ed van der Elskén: Crazy World", a collaboration between the Rijksmuseum and the Nederlands Fotomuseum, is at the Rijksmuseum from October 30 to January 10 2021. "Feest" is edited by Hans Rooseboom and Mattie Boom; rijksmuseumshop.nl



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, ALL FROM FEEST: BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR THE FLEMISH WRITER HUGO CLAUS AT DEBEZIGE BIJ PUBLISHING HOUSE, AMSTERDAM, APRIL 1959; STATE VISIT OF QUEEN ELIZABETH AND PRINCE PHILIP TO THE HAGUE, MARCH 26 1958; COVER DESIGN SHOWING THE AUDIENCE AT A CONCERT BY LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ALL STARS IN BLOKKER, MAY 10 1959; WOMAN AT THE ANNUAL FAIR, NIEUWMARKT, AMSTERDAM, MAY 1958

**'One of the biggest surprises in the archive was the discovery of an unfinished book'**







# Rowley Leigh Recipes



## Mussel memory

Photographs by Andy Sewell

We're back in Puglia for what is becoming the annual bucket-and-spade holiday and find ourselves in Rosa's, a beachside lido, bar, deckchair and restaurant enterprise.

The eponymous Rosa is grafting away in the kitchen and making me feel slightly ashamed at having packed in restaurant work at my tender age, while she appears to be going full steam in her mid-eighties.

All down this coast, you will find places like it and you wonder slightly if there can be a crustacean or bivalve left in the Adriatic or Ionian seas, such is the appetite for every type of shellfish. The menu at Rosa's is typical, should you feel the need to see it. For us, it is usually *crudo*, *antipasti* and then *vongole*. That is to say raw oysters, mussels, little red prawns and langoustines piled high on ice. Then stuffed mussels, anchovies (fried and marinated in vinegar), octopus, squid and perhaps some little fried red mullets, followed, of course, by *spaghetti alle vongole* (clams). And if everybody else is having pretty much the same, that is because Rosa does these things very well. Practice has made close to perfect.

Our friend Victoria finds the whole *crudo* business deeply discomfiting, especially raw mussels. I love them, but prising open mussels is a great deal trickier than shucking oysters. In Puglia, they do it with an effortless flick of the wrist - not just to present raw but also to be used in the *tiella*, a little claypot of baked rice, mussels and potatoes that is popular all over the region. It is exquisite but if I am not prepared to do the work myself, I don't see why I should ask you to, so I came up with this risotto variation.

Some will say risotto belongs up north and not in the south. It is true that this is "inauthentic", but Italians are pretty good at coming up with inauthentic dishes themselves. Besides, rice is becoming quite popular down south even if it is only grown further north. So there.

More columns at [ft.com/leigh](http://ft.com/leigh)

### Mussel and potato risotto

Try and get carmaroll rice for this: It holds up best and retains a nutty texture. Serves four to six.

- 1kg mussels
- 2 cloves garlic
- 100ml olive oil
- 1 bottle dry white wine
- 1 large white onion
- 1 red chilli
- 2 large potatoes
- 300g risotto rice
- 3 tbs parsley, finely chopped
- Squeeze of lemon

1 — Soak the mussels in a bowl of water and pick through them, scraping off their beards and barnacles and discarding any broken ones.

2 — Chop the garlic finely and stew for a minute in a large saucepan with a couple of tablespoons of olive oil.

3 — Add the mussels and half the white wine, cover the pan tightly and place on a high heat. Occasionally shake the pan lightly and check the mussels after three or four minutes.

4 — The moment they open, tip them into a colander placed over a large bowl to collect the all-important juice. Rinse out the saucepan and return the mussels to it. Strain the juice carefully through a fine sieve, leaving the sand behind. Add a third of the juice to the mussels, cover again and leave to one side.

5 — Finely chop the onion and red chilli and stew in another couple of tablespoons of olive oil in a fresh, heavy casserole.

6 — Chop the potatoes equally finely (3mm cubes) and rinse in cold water before adding to the softened onion and chilli. Turn briefly and then add the rice. Season with a pinch of sea salt and some black pepper and turn in the oil until the rice starts to stick. Pour in the remaining half bottle of wine, turn down the heat and let the rice slowly soak up the wine, turning only very occasionally.

7 — Once the wine has been absorbed and the rice is beginning to stick again, start adding the mussel juice in steady stages, stirring only occasionally (too much stirring breaks up the rice, releases too much starch and creates a pudding). The rice will take 20 minutes to cook. When it's almost done but still feels a little firm, briefly reheat the mussels in their own saucepan before pouring, juice and all, into the risotto. Add the parsley at the same time and turn up the heat to evaporate the extra juice. Fold the mussels into the rice and, once incorporated, make sure the rice is tender and taste for seasoning. It is unlikely to need salt but a little squeeze of lemon will be efficacious. Dribble a bit of olive oil over the risotto and take to the table.

**Wine**  
It is often difficult to find really fresh, lively white wines in the south. A Verdicchio from further north, in Le Marche, is ideal with seafood. The only hard rule is to avoid oaked wines.





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# Jancis Robinson Wine

## Burgundy feels the heat

For most French people who can afford it, the summer holiday is sacrosanct. Long before Covid-19, offices, shops and restaurants in France were routinely closed for the entire month of August.

However, as in the rest of France, Burgundy's vigneronns have had to reshape their annual schedules. July is the latest they can safely go on holiday now that climate change is moving their harvest dates inexorably forward. This year marked the earliest grape harvest ever in many important wine regions, not least Burgundy.

The first grapes were picked there on August 12 and the harvest was well underway by the third week of the month. It used to start a good month later.

At Domaine Michel Lafarge in Volnay, one of Burgundy's most respected producers, the 2020 vintage ripened so much earlier than expected that there wasn't time to move the 2019s before the new crop arrived. Sylvain Pataille got back from holiday on August 24 with just four frantic days to prepare his team, winery and picking equipment before the start of the harvest in Marsannay at the northern end of Burgundy's heartland, the Côte d'Or.

Marianne and Pierre Duroché in Gevrey-Chambertin, whose delicate red burgundies are all the rage, had made plans to fly back from their holiday in Canada on August 21. In the end, they couldn't travel to North America because of Covid-19, which saved them from being disastrously late for the start of their 2020 harvest.

The pandemic made an extraordinary vintage exceptional in other ways too. The picking teams had to be socially distanced, for example, and there was none of the usual end-of-harvest jollity. On a recent trip to Burgundy to taste the 2019s, Loïc Dugat of Domaine Dugat-Py described to me how, instead of feeding everyone



As imagined by Leon Edler



companionably inside, gloved employees issued the pickers with airline-style pre-packaged meals in the vineyard. To celebrate finishing, the team had to make do with an aperitif in the courtyard.

As Dugat (who now takes his holidays in December) pointed out, vigneronns are having to get used to the fact that grapes ripen much faster in the long, hot days of August than they do at the end of September. It is vital, therefore, that they are picked quickly, so he has doubled his picking team from 30 to 60 for just 10 hectares of vines. By contrast, Guillaume d'Angerville of Volnay halved his picking team this year to 20 because of Covid-19 and was delighted to find that

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**'This year marked the earliest grape harvest ever in many important wine regions, not least Burgundy'**

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productivity was by no means halved. In his father's time, picking was spread out over a fortnight; now they must do it in just a week.

In the hot, dry summers to which Burgundians are becoming accustomed, the problem of sunburnt grapes challenges growers who struggled to ripen them less than a generation ago. On arrival at the cellar, the crop used to be sorted for grapes that had rotted in the rain. These days, those at the sorting table need to pick out all the scorched grapes without an ounce of juice. Mid-afternoon is when the risk of sunburn is highest, exacerbated if there are vestiges of vine treatments on the grapes. (Producers were keen to stress that any treatments would be organic.)

Meanwhile, Lalou Bize-Leroy of Domaine Leroy in Vosne-Romanée was particularly thrilled with the quality of her 2020 grapes and claims that, thanks to her high-trained, exceptionally leafy vines, ▶



## The Burgundian wine calendar old and new

Bottling of the previous vintage is usually sometime between December and April.

	20TH CENTURY	21ST CENTURY
<b>January</b>	Pruning	Burgundy Week In London (but not in 2021)
<b>February</b>	Vineyard maintenance, pruning	Sales trips (but probably not in 2021)
<b>March</b>	Odd jobs, perhaps last of pruning	Pruning (as late as possible to delay budburst). First buds appear, plant new vines
<b>April</b>	First buds appear, plant new vines, ploughing	Frost alert and protection, tidying the shoots
<b>May</b>	Frost alert and protection, tidying the shoots	Frost alert and protection. Vines bloom end of the month
<b>June</b>	Vines bloom, tidying the shoots, treatments to protect from pests and disease	Tidy up the shoots, trim excess foliage, treat vines to protect them from pests and disease
<b>July</b>	Continue treatments, trim excess foliage	Trim and treat vines. Sunburn protection. Irrigate vines. Short holiday?
<b>August</b>	Holiday, trim excess foliage and prepare for harvest at the end of the month	Grape harvest
<b>September</b>	Grape harvest	Winemaking
<b>October</b>	Winemaking, pull out old vines	Odd jobs, pull out old vines
<b>November</b>	Show visitors the previous vintage	Plant new vines. Receive visitors usually, odd jobs
<b>December</b>	Ploughing round dormant vines in which the sap has fallen	Worry that warmer winters weaken the soil and fail to give the vines a valuable winter sleep

◀ none of hers were burnt and all of them were superbly healthy. A leading practitioner of lunar-influenced biodynamic viticulture, she describes her 2020 vintage as “great” – even better than 2018 and 2019. Her 2020 alcohol levels are sometimes as high as 15 per cent but the wines are balanced, she assures me. Certainly no one I met in Burgundy complained of low acid levels in 2019 or 2020 – the acid was concentrated, along with the sugar, in the small, sun-dried berries.

Although Bize-Leroy’s unusual methods were initially ridiculed, unsurprisingly more and more growers are starting to copy them for their most valuable vines. It is costly in terms of labour – she keeps a permanent vineyard staff of between 12 and 24 people to cosset her 22 hectares – but it does seem to yield results.

This summer was not just hot but extremely dry – so dry that Denis Bachelet of Gevrey-Chambertin seemed in the depths of despair at the number of his older ones that had perished in the drought. It is usually young vines that are most at risk in dry summers because their roots have not had time to penetrate deeply into the soil but this year both Bachelet and Jean-François Coche of Meursault were stunned by the effects of drought on their older vines as well. Irrigating anything other than baby vines is banned in France. I naively asked Bachelet whether there was a move to ask the authorities for permission to irrigate. “Where would we find the water?” he replied.

**‘This summer was not just hot but extremely dry – winemakers were stunned by the effect on older vines’**

The vinifications were finished so early in September that wine producers now find themselves unexpectedly idle – not least because Covid-19 has dramatically shrunk the number of visitors expected during the popular autumn tasting season. Vintners are busy doing maintenance jobs they used to do in the depths of winter.

Presumably the dry summer was at least appreciated by the bevy of builders I saw in the region. Morey-St-Denis has been invaded by those building new cellars for Bernard Arnault at Clos des Lambrays, François Pinault at Clos de Tart and the Seysses family at Domaine Dujac. In Gevrey-Chambertin, the landscape is dominated by the crane for the Rousseaus’ new cellar and the stack of portacabins needed to direct reconstruction of Domaine Rebourseau for yet another prominent French businessman, Martin Bouygues.

Arnault, Pinault and Bouygues all bought into fashionable – but changing – Burgundy in the past six years. I wonder whether their staff did full analyses of the likely effects of climate change before they invested their millions. **3**

More columns at [ft.com/jancis-robinson](http://ft.com/jancis-robinson)

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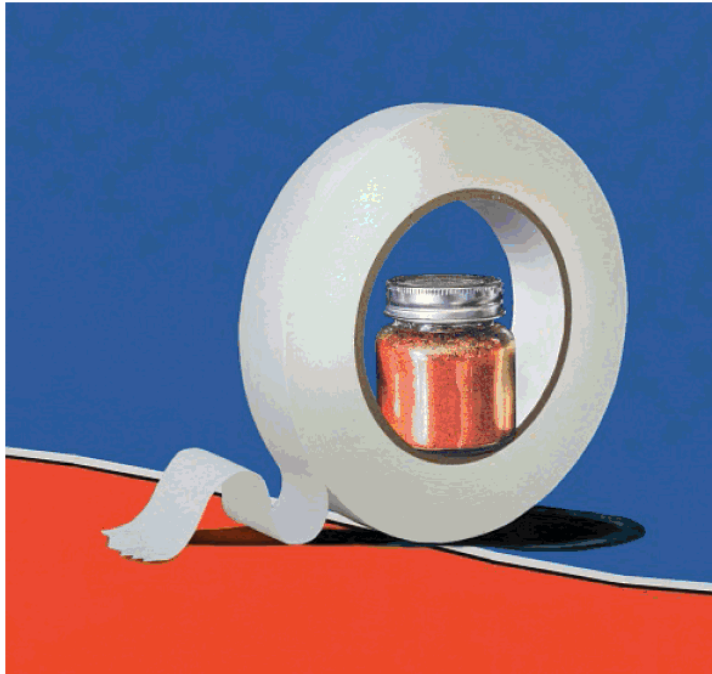
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**FT Weekend**



I'D BE LOST WITHOUT...

## White tape

How *Sam Buckley* regains composure and restores order when things get a little too chaotic in the kitchen. Illustration by *Anna Bu Kliewer*

This is not a high-tech piece of equipment that can transform a vegetable's texture at the flick of a switch. It's not a flavour enhancer or a magical thickening agent. It's not even remotely innovative.

Still, white tape has a special place in the kitchen for me. We use it to label our work and date the many things that go in the fridge and fermenting room. Ferments that might take more than a year can be checked on - notes are added with another strip of white tape and referred to later. In essence, it's our analogue memory bank, a humble member of the team, quietly guiding us through each day.

As with any kitchen, there are elements of chaos in the hours leading up to service. An ingredient has to be modified on the fly, a blender is broken, a whisk attachment lost - everything must be dealt with swiftly and efficiently so that when guests arrive the dining room is filled with harmony and calm.

Amid such chaos, it's good to find a quiet moment to realign. Labelling our work presents this momentary pause. It creates space to reflect. The white tape acts as a barometer of where the mind is at.

We are extremely meticulous, always using a sharp knife or scissors to make sure things are neat. A torn label is noted as a "label crime". There is a pride taken in the neatness of a label that feels mindful and can help lead into the next task at hand.

Having said all that, I am without doubt the worst criminal in the kitchen, usually tearing through the building to break down a pig or prep a sauce and barely labelling anything. Yet in those rare moments that I do regain composure, I find this unassuming work carries as much weight as the evening service, the grand affair.

The white tape has other uses too. If I nick myself with a knife during service, for example, it comes to my rescue, sealing a cut quickly and effectively and allowing me to career towards my next escapade.

My grandad always told me, "Do every job to the best of your ability, even if it's sweeping a floor." Twenty years on I am still wrestling with the simple things, but I hope one day - with the help of white tape - I'll get there. **FT**

*Sam Buckley is chef-patron of Where The Light Gets In in Stockport; wtlgi.co*

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# Ravinder Bhogal Recipes



## Root of the matter

Photographs by Aaron Graubart

Now in season, homegrown British roots such as swedes, parsnips, beets and celeriac are lamentably undervalued. Even in the height of lockdown, when sales of pulses rocketed, they remained unloved and overlooked. But they should not be dismissed, especially when supply chains are fragile and shortages likely.

They might not win many beauty pageants, but these subterranean beauties are diamonds in the rough. If you treat them with a little love and care, roots and tubers are dependable and rewarding – full of sweet, deep and surprising flavours that will see you through a lean winter.

They are versatile too. For example, carrots, beetroots and turnips do very well thinly shaved and quick-pickled with white wine vinegar plus a few aromatics such as black peppercorns, cinnamon and cloves. Mellow sweet potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes, swedes and parsnips can be boiled and mashed into silken purées with generous amounts of cream and the addition of something feisty such as fresh ginger or turmeric or fragrant spices like cardamom or nutmeg.

For me, it's celeriac – warty, strange and impenetrable – that offers the most promise. Hack away the brutish exterior with a knife and chop it into fine matchsticks before folding in horseradish and mayonnaise for a punchy remoulade. Or even sexier, roast it whole, slice thickly and pan-fry like a steak before serving with a Café de Paris sauce like Yotam Ottolenghi in his new book *Flavour*.

Root vegetables may look like Plain Janes, but the way they're cooked doesn't have to be dowdy. This savoury cake gives them a sexy makeover and a moment to shine. Roasting them teases out their natural sugars so that they caramelize beautifully on top of the cake. The gremolata, which is full of delectable things such as preserved lemon and pul biber, should be doled out liberally to bring lightness to the earthy roots and cut through the richness of the cheesy cake. **21**

Ravinder Bhogal is chef-patron of Jikoni in London. Her book "Jikoni: Proudly Inauthentic Recipes from an Immigrant Kitchen" is out now. @cookinbooks

### Root vegetable and chestnut cake with preserved lemon gremolata

Serve with a little salad as a light lunch or supper or with a poached or fried egg for breakfast.

#### Serves six

- 75g unsalted butter, softened, plus extra for greasing
- 350g root vegetables of your choice (I used a mixture of swede, carrots, celeriac, turnip, baby beetroot and Jerusalem artichokes), chopped
- 100ml extra virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- A few thyme leaves, picked
- Sea salt
- Black pepper, freshly ground
- Honey
- 125g plain flour
- 75g fine polenta
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tbs dried oregano
- 2 tbs Greek yoghurt
- 100g Parmesan cheese, finely grated
- 4 large eggs
- Zest of one lemon
- 5 baby onions, halved
- 25g cooked chestnuts, halved

#### For the preserved lemon gremolata

- A large handful of parsley, finely chopped
- 1 small garlic clove, finely chopped
- 2 preserved lemons, finely chopped
- ½ tsp pul biber
- Sea salt and pepper to taste
- 4 tbs extra virgin olive oil

1 – Heat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4.

2 – Grease and line a 25cm loose-bottomed cake tin.

3 – Chop and slice the vegetables, keeping their size pretty even so they all cook at the same time. Drizzle with olive oil and add thyme. Season with sea salt and black pepper and then drizzle the honey over them. Toss well.

4 – In a medium bowl, mix together the dry ingredients and lemon zest then set aside. In a mixer, cream the butter, yoghurt, Parmesan and oil until pale and very fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time and beat until smooth. Fold in the dry ingredients with a metal spoon until combined.

5 – Spoon the batter into the lined cake tin. Lay the prepared vegetables and chestnuts over the cake batter and then bake until the vegetables are caramelised and a small knife inserted into the centre of the cake comes out clean, this should take about 40 to 45 minutes. Let the cake cool before removing from the pan.

6 – To make the gremolata, simply mix together all the ingredients. Serve the cake at room temperature with a generous helping of gremolata.

EARTHENWARE PLATE, THE CONMAN SHOP; ROSE GOLD SPOON, COX AND COX









JONATHAN'S GUESTS, FROM LEFT: PENELOPE FITZGERALD, DAVID HUME, MARY LOU WILLIAMS, KARL POLANYI, MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

## FANTASY DINNER PARTY

JONATHAN DERBYSHIRE

At a Renaissance writer's château, philosophers and a jazz musician enjoy the best of rustic French cuisine

I have convened my fantasy dinner party at the Château de Montaigne in the Périgord in south-western France. It was here, in 1571, that Michel de Montaigne retired to compose his *Essays* on humanist topics, which are celebrated to this day for their brilliance and variety.

Conversational versatility is desirable in any dining companion, of course, and Montaigne's ability to apply his wit and intelligence to a bewildering array of seemingly unconnected topics was unparalleled. He is my first guest.

We will gather in Montaigne's library in the castle tower where he has carved slogans from the work of the ancient Greek sceptic Sextus Empiricus into the room's wooden beams. It was from Sextus that Montaigne acquired his aversion to what he called "pedantism" – an excessive dedication to

philosophical speculation that threatens to curdle into obsession – the last thing anyone wants at the dinner table.

Happily, though, Montaigne didn't counsel caution in all things. "There is no point," he wrote, "in liking wine moderately." Consequently, I have ensured that a case of 2005 Château de Montaigne Bergerac is on hand.

Our chef is Elizabeth David, whose *French Provincial Cooking* introduced the jaded postwar British palate to *la cuisine du terroir*. We will start with a *salade niçoise*, a "rough country salad rather than a fussy chef's concoction". Heartiness, not finesse, being the watchword, I have asked David to prepare a *cassoulet*, a slow-cooked casserole, for the main course. She says this is really a dish to be eaten at midday, but I'm the host, so I make the rules. There will be goat's cheese from nearby Rocamadour and *tarte tatin* for those who have any room left after the casserole.

Montaigne's belief in the primacy of judgment over knowledge was shared by my second guest, the 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume saw the charms of sociability as an important counterpoint to abstruse metaphysical inquiry.

Dining, playing backgammon or otherwise making merry with one's friends are all activities apt, he thought, to acquaint us with the limits of human reason by making our intellectual labours seem "cold and strained and ridiculous" by comparison. Like Montaigne, Hume was a generalist. So I will steer him off the subject of philosophical scepticism and on to the history of

**'Knowing how to weigh and choose one's words goes a long way at the dinner table'**

England, to which he found time to devote a six-volume treatise.

My third guest, Penelope Fitzgerald, turns up looking a little bedraggled, with her belongings in a carrier bag. I have invited her because I revere her as the finest English novelist of the postwar period. She will also provide some useful temperamental balance. Where Hume and Montaigne were expansive, Fitzgerald was often reticent, sometimes verging on the gnomic. "I always feel," she said, "that the reader is very insulted by being told too much." She was

talking about writing fiction, but knowing how to weigh and choose one's words goes a long way at the dinner table, too – something Montaigne recognised when he wrote that eloquence doesn't just come in the torrential variety.

Like Hume, Fitzgerald had a highly developed historical sensibility. Although her novels are short, many of them contain fantastically detailed recreations of, for instance, pre-revolutionary Moscow or Thuringia in the late 18th century. Someone once asked her how come she knew so much about salt mining in Germany during that period. She replied, as if this was the most natural thing in the world, that she'd read contemporaneous records of the salt mines – in German. So she is sure to surprise the gathering with things that none of us know.

One period and place she never wrote about, however, and with which I'm mildly obsessed, is Vienna in the first half of the 20th century. So my fourth guest is the economic historian Karl Polanyi, who was a magazine editor there in the tumultuous period between the end of the first world war and the advent of fascism.

Polanyi, who was Jewish (and a socialist to boot), fled Vienna for London in 1933. It was there that he wrote his masterpiece, *The Great Transformation*. That book is a diagnosis of the collapse of "19th-century civilisation", by which he meant the first era of economic globalisation. Polanyi will no doubt have something to say about how the second age of globalisation, and with it the rules-based international order, has itself now begun to unravel.

I will propose a digestif to round off the evening. My choice is a glass of Château d'Yquem – Montaigne had an ancestral connection to the Yquem estate. And while we ponder the intermittently disastrous history of human beings' tendency to try to remake the world in the image of abstract rational ideals, my fifth guest, the American jazz musician Mary Lou Williams, will accompany us on the piano.

Starting her career in the heady atmosphere of Kansas City in the late 1920s, Williams lived through several eras of jazz. So she'll dazzle us first with ragtime, and then with bebop and swing. "No one can put a style on me," she once said. "I change all the time." It's something we might all aspire to. **21**

*Jonathan Derbyshire is the FT's acting deputy world news editor*

# Games



## A Round on the Links

by James Walton



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the link, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1. Opened in 1997, what was the biggest public building constructed in Britain in the 20th century?
2. Which fictional character is the

widow of Charles Hamilton and Frank Kennedy?

3. Which throne was the symbol of the Persian and Iranian shahs?

4. Who comes fourth in this sequence: Patricia Booker, Anna Maria Torv, Wendi Deng, ...?

5. According to Jesus (above) in a New

Testament parable, what is the smallest of all seeds?

6. What kind of fruit is dried to make a prune?

7. What's the first line of the Shakespearean soliloquy that ends, "The bell invites me./ Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell/ That summons thee to heaven or to hell"?

8. In the nursery rhyme "Rub-a-dub-dub", who is the third man in the tub?

9. Which 1966 album begins with "Taxman" and ends with "Tomorrow Never Knows"?

10. What pejorative 19th-century nickname for the poor Manhattan neighbourhood of Clinton is still in use today, despite 21st-century gentrification?

## The Picture Round

by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



+

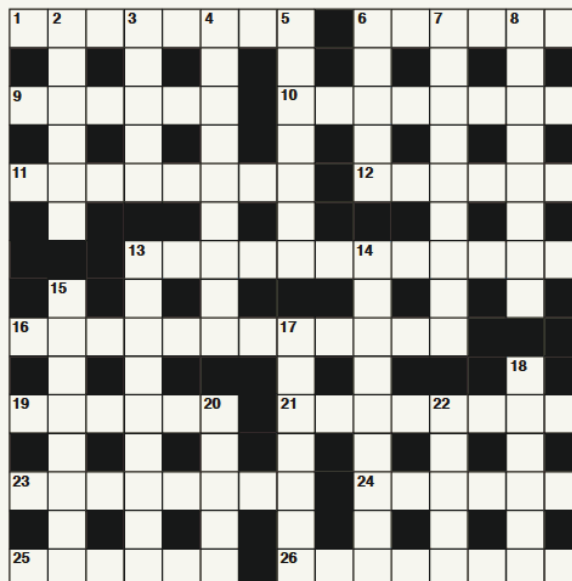


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Answers page 8

## The Crossword

No 511. Set by Aldhelm



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

### ACROSS

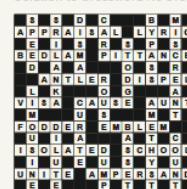
- 1 Untrue, false (8)
- 6 Refund (6)
- 9 Pair (6)
- 10 Powerless (8)
- 11 Get to grips once more (8)
- 12 Ran off to marry (6)
- 13 Stop working (5, 2, 1, 4)
- 16 Spooky, paranormal (12)
- 19 Sufferer (6)
- 21 Jumble, mix (8)
- 23 Statuette (8)
- 24 Yes (6)
- 25 Social standing (6)
- 26 Debate (8)

### DOWN

- 2 It's right to support the Queen (6)
- 3 Mature person I so missed, sadly (5)
- 4 Address includes gym enterprise (9)
- 5 Remit incorporates gratuity as pay (7)
- 6 Currency's right for everyone - pennies, commonly (5)
- 7 Find hospital in the midst of terrible battle or engagement (9)
- 8 Gently look after broken lyre (8)
- 13 Relative's rage about provocation (5, 4)
- 14 Surging forward using horn recklessly (9)
- 15 Small dog and one lean fighter (8)
- 17 Non-staff worker has time for painting (7)

- 18 Misbehaving artist sent to the back (6)
- 20 Sea's a source of power (5)
- 22 Internet device put up in some domain (5)

Solution to Crossword No 510







# GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

## A call to farms: Trump woos the agricultural vote



In recent years, economics professors Wendong Zhang and Minghao Li have surveyed farmers across America. Sometimes they grilled them about the US-China trade war, economic swings and agricultural subsidies; more recently, they focused on the upcoming presidential election. “We believe most US farmers will stay loyal to [Donald] Trump,” they wrote in a recent essay, posted on The Conversation website.

A survey the pair did of Midwest crop farmers in spring 2019 showed that “56 per cent said they somewhat or strongly support Trump’s tariffs on Chinese products, despite retaliation on their own exports”. Polls elsewhere have also produced emphatic support for Trump: a July survey by Farm Futures of large-scale farmers found that 75 per cent of them backed the president. Strikingly, this was a rate broadly unchanged from 2016.

To outside eyes – particularly those in liberal coastal regions – this might seem surprising. After all, macro-level data suggest that farmers have good reason to feel angry. The US-China trade war is thought to have wiped \$39bn off American exports, including many agricultural ones. Zhang and Li have calculated that it destroyed \$10bn of soyabean sales alone. Separately, farm bankruptcies rose 20 per cent last year to reach an eight-year high, while Covid-19 has sparked further pain in recent months.

This has boosted hopes among Democrats that farmers might switch sides this November. A report in August by a media site called Progressive Farmer, for example, declared that there was “some potential waning in support for the Trump administration” with just 71 per cent of those farmers asked in a survey backing the president, down from 89 per cent in April.

But, say Zhang and Li, one key point to understand about the farming community is that the president “has found a way to make it up to them: record subsidies”. The pair report that the administration doled out \$8.5bn and \$14.3bn to farmers and ranchers in 2018 and 2019 respectively, to compensate them for the hit from the trade war. Another \$30bn of aid has followed this year to fight the slump caused by Covid-19.

These are striking numbers. But doubly so, given how unevenly this aid has been spread: farmers in Democrat-dominated California were largely excluded, but those in Trump-leaning areas such as North Dakota and Iowa received much more. Does this matter? Probably not in terms of the November vote. The farming lobby has long skewed Republican – and farmers and ranchers make up a mere 1.3 per cent of the country’s workforce.

The important point is what it symbolises more broadly. Chiefly, it should remind election-watchers who (like me) are sitting in liberal strongholds such as New York just how difficult it is to track the sentiment of other voting tribes in the US with confidence. After all, the media echo

chamber is ever more polarised and Covid-19 has confined everyone to their social bubbles.

The blow that agriculture has taken from the US-China trade war has long been clear from a macro perspective. But what has not been obvious to anyone sitting a long way from a farmer’s fields is how subsidies have been dispersed: the details of this system are opaque and tend to go largely ignored. Even the fact that the farmers received \$30bn of Covid-19 aid sparked little mainstream media attention until recently.

This is part of a bigger pattern. Though the damage Covid-19 has done to the American economy as a whole is well known, it is hard to track its impact on micro-level populations since

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### ‘The president has found a way to make it up to America’s farming community: record subsidies’

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the experience of different sectors has been so varied – and the system for distributing subsidies so apparently variable. Some small businesses, corporate sectors and towns have been bailed out; others have not. Many families have received aid; others have been cut out. All of this will undoubtedly play into voter sentiment.

And as the story of the farm subsidies shows, the Trump team is undoubtedly determined to use this variable pattern of subsidies to boost its own electoral chances; and most specifically, to raise the probability that Trump will win the electoral college vote with the support of Midwestern states – even if he loses the overall popular vote. (Which, after all, is what happened in 2016.)

**O**n balance, it still seems unlikely to work: most polls give Joe Biden a nine-point lead over Trump. But as Nate Silver, the well-known statistician, warned this week, even with that lead “don’t assume that the race is in the bag for Biden”. According to Silver’s model: “Although Covid-19 and other issues make Trump’s road to re-election difficult, he still has a 12 per cent chance of winning the electoral college.”

The key point, then, is that a tinge of humility is required from anyone “calling” the election now – or describing how politics and economics will intersect on the ground when the pandemic has made conditions so uneven and opaque. Rarely has so much rested on a vote. And rarely have I felt so wary of making overall predictions, even if it seems clear how those farmers might vote. **FT**

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