The world’s top 50 thinkers for the Covid-19 age

INTRODUCTION BY TOM CLARK
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICH FAIRHEAD

Exclusive ebook edition
All the names, and all the results
For many years, *Prospect* has made waves by naming the world’s top thinkers, and in 2020 we went for an all new list, to fit the shaken world of the Covid age. After we published the names, with summaries of their achievements in our summer double issue, the list was opened to a public vote in which around 20,000 people took part—and many of these readers also took the chance to tell us which great minds we missed. This e-book reproduces the introduction, the full list of the top thinkers with pen portraits of each, and then the detail of the vote—including the top thinker of the lot.

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Continue reading for the top 50 thinkers of 2020
there is nothing like an emergency to make you realise the value of practical ideas. When the chips are down, and death rates are up, the world wants answers—especially from its sharpest thinkers.

As *Prospect* revisits the task of identifying the leading minds of the moment, in the intellectual hit parade which we have produced in varying formats since 2004, that test of immediate and real-world relevance looms large. As we compiled our longlist—drawing on the advice of distinguished experts in various fields who have written for us over the years—and then whittled it down towards 50, we were struck by how different the list looked from 2019’s. It was at the point where we had around 35 confirmed names that we noticed not one of them was a holdover.

A measure of churn was expected—we put a premium on new books and recent interventions, after all—but not a wholesale changing of the guard. Having previously been sceptical of those claims that Covid-19 would “change everything”—why would it?—I suddenly felt there was something in them. We decided to make a virtue of the disruption, and produce an entirely new list for a shaken world that is beginning to reset.

The immediate relevance of some of our thinkers to the Covid-19 era speaks for itself: vaccinologist Sarah Gilbert and science writer Ed Yong being prime examples. Just as interesting, however, are those who work in fields a mile away from medicine, but who have nonetheless acquired a new salience in the dark and peculiar circumstances of 2020.

In economics, after the sudden stop followed by all the stimulus and bailouts, we are plainly going to need to talk about debt. Having something to say on that helps two of our big brains—Stephanie Kelton and Thomas Piketty—earn a place on the list. In public policy, with a staggering proportion of the workforce furloughed, there is a sense that the hour of the godfather of the Universal Basic Income movement, Philippe Van Parijs, might at last have come. Likewise, the polymathic thoughts of Ari Ezra Waldman on the problems of privacy in a digital age rocket up the agenda when governments everywhere are grappling with intrusive “track-and-trace” schemes. And in politics, while New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern had already shown creativity in developing a governing ethos of “kindness,” it always sounded rather airy—until she showed how it could be put to practical effect in the coronavirus context, and achieved some of the world’s best results.

So all-encompassing has been the disruption that many varied and otherwise unrelated minds have found new ways to shine: Sally Rooney moved from the page to the TV screen, and kept us culturally (and tearfully) engaged in lockdown; Eric Yuan Zoomed in from relative obscurity as his video platform became the virtual meeting room, as well as the substitute pub.

Other—more enduring—implications will eventually flow from the chance the lockdown gave us to reset. In the arts, different sorts of names come to the fore: names like Jenny Odell, for example, who uses discarded everyday objects to invite mindful meditation on the transience of our day-to-day lives and how they this fit (or don’t fit) with nature.

Spending time away from the usual bustle, and perhaps in the garden, has raised environmental consciousness. So, too, has the jolt to reflect afresh on how all the life, health and happiness that civilisation affords hangs by a thread. We duly hail all manner of minds that engage with ecology, whether that be through the critical thinking of Timothy Morton, the rigorous popularisation of David Attenborough or Carlota Perez’s thoughts on how the economy can be steered in a greener direction as it splutters back into life.

A spell of enforced solitude will also turn the mind to the question of who “we” really are—and prompt it to interrogate all the old stories about where we come from. Although it was catalysed by police brutality in the US, it may be no coincidence that the history wars over statue-toppling took hold this year; Thaddeus Metz, Angela Saini, Cornell West, Olivette Otele and William Dalrymple are all top thinkers with things to say about the many warped consequences that can result from one culture subjugating another; Ross Douthat, meanwhile, is a thoughtful conservative voice who cautions us against allowing frenzied arguments about identity to silence discussion.

“There’s a space on the voting form. Because with the liveliest minds don’t fit) with nature.

There are some names here whose special interest it would be contrived to put down to Covid-19. But even here—coming back to my starting point—amid a mood of anxious uncertainty, they have to earn their place by way of practical relevance, even if that is relevance to the big contemporary challenges that existed before the virus. Challenges like, say, the rise of China (Julia Lovell), the decline of the west (Anne Applebaum), the politics of personality (Hilary Mantel) or the twin threats to the rule of law and sound constitutional governance (Bruce Ackerman, Dahlia Lithwick, Philippe Sands).

The diversity of the list is rich. It contains a preponderance of women for the first time ever, and pleasingly mixes brilliant young minds (Lisa Piccirillo) with a couple of nonagenarians.

While it also includes a good mix of liberal, socialist and conservative voices, I can anticipate one objection in the absence of any thinker who can truly be said to have emerged from within the global populist insurgency associated with Donald Trump. We have thought long and hard about this. We have run and will continue to run pieces by nostalgic writers who reject globalisation. We make space for serious minds who rage about all the communities it has left behind (see Paul Collier, on p50). But as the Trumpian project becomes ever-more nakedly anti-intellectual and anti-reason, we struggle to regard even intelligent individuals who choose to defend it as serious thinkers. Some readers may take a different view, and see more substance in “nativism.” But for me, Steve Bannon and his like are cynics; the value of ideas for them is purely instrumental, for use in power play.

With that one caveat, the mix is something to marvel at. The range of intellectual endeavours is a reminder of the breadth of human genius. I hope you’ll enjoy finding out more about the thinkers who strike us as most pertinent to our age as much as we do on the inside of *Prospect* did. Salute them and take the chance to cast a vote (details at the end of the package) to help crown a top thinker for 2020. We’ll publish the full results in our next issue. Oh, and please don’t miss the chance to tell us who we missed—there’s a space on the voting form. Because with the liveliest minds and the biggest questions, there is never a final answer. Long may human beings continue to discuss, disagree—and think!

Tom Clark is editor of Prospect
Bruce Ackerman
Constitutional scholar

The turbulence of the last few years will eventually settle—but into what? The shape of tomorrow’s politics depends on how this moment “constitutionalises.” If Boris Johnson’s prorogation wheeze sets a precedent, or Donald Trump’s judicial bench-packing continues much longer, liberal democracy is in trouble. Its defenders need to swot up on how constitutions can go wrong—and right. Bruce Ackerman, a Yale professor who’s just as informed on De Gaulle, Mandela and Walesa as he is on America’s founders, is a sure guide. His “popular sovereignty initiative” to rationalise the process for amending the US constitution could put principled reformers back on the front foot.

Elizabeth Anderson
Philosopher

She started out in economics before abandoning a field she had come to view as ethically barren, and has since combined philosophy with the social sciences to analyse the power structures around us—and, as an excited New Yorker puts it, “redefine equality.” Her interest in race and gender is urgently relevant in 2020, and her refreshing take on the Protestant work ethic (which she insists has a progressive pro-labour side as well as a conservative materialism) underpins a powerful account of modern workplace relations. Always confronting the world as it truly is rather than how we would like it to be, she won a MacArthur “genius grant” in 2019.

Anne Applebaum
Historian

The American international order is crumbling. Its opponents always suspected it was mere cover for US imperialism, and the sudden swerve of many former enthusiasts to support the narrow chauvinism of Trump’s “America First” slogan encourages that dark view. Applebaum, long an authority on the abuses of Communist and post-Communist Eastern Europe, in her new book Twilight of Democracy is unsparing in exposing the moral bankruptcy of Trumpian Republicanism. Her sharp pen is as persuasive as any in presenting the idea of the “west” as a morally serious project—and one whose loss we may come to mourn.

David Attenborough
Environmentalist

Not all climate-change activists are Swedish teenagers. At 94, David Attenborough is one of the country’s—if not the world’s—most influential thinkers on the environment. Just as the Extinction Rebellion protests were taking off last year, Attenborough presented the hour-long documentary Climate Change: The Facts, which relied on his authority to convey the truth about what we’re doing to the planet. For decades his documentaries have alerted millions to the precious wonders of the animal and plant kingdoms, and the threat that humans pose to them. No longer confined to the BBC, his eight-part Netflix series Our Planet brought him even closer to truly global domination.

William Dalrymple
Historian

The Scottish historian, long resident in India, has made it his life’s work to reckon with the legacy of the British Empire in the subcontinent. His recent book The Anarchy is a barnstorming account of the East India Company, the corporation that launched the hostile takeover. Dalrymple describes Robert Clive—whose newly-controversial statue remains next to the Foreign Office—as a man of “extreme aggression and devil-may-care-audacity.” But Dalrymple also points to Indian complicity with the British, as well as to the many atrocities of local princes. In polarised times, in which one side acquits the Empire of its crimes, and the other blames imperialism for every last human wickedness, his work is an important corrective.
The opinion pages of the New York Times have become a battleground in the culture wars. In June, a Republican senator’s provocative call to “Send in the troops” on Black Lives Matter protesters caused a newsroom revolt. The most eloquent conservative voice in the NYT is Ross Douthat, whose cogent analysis of the farrago was a qualified defence of the paper’s liberal values—strident, even unpalatable views need to be aired, he argued. Douthat, a traditional Catholic, is also a critic of modern secularism, as he argues in his new book The Decadent Society. But he is no fan of the US president. In a recent op-ed, he argued that “Trump will be an accelerant of the right’s erasure, an agent of its marginalisation and defeat.” Within months, Covid-19 made his argument urgent.

Ross Douthat
Columnist

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Jared Diamond
Geographer

Twenty-three years ago in Guns, Germs and Steel, the polyglot professor (whose scholarship has ranged from human physiology to ornithology and anthropology) drew our attention to how far disease had shaped world civilisations. In Upheaval last year, he looked at how societies can recover from catastrophes such as invasion, political collapse or mass death. Just as individuals need to develop strategies of resilience, he argues, so too should countries. “The challenge, for nations as for individuals in crisis, is to figure out which parts of their identities are already functioning well and don’t need changing, and which parts are no longer working and do need changing.” Within months, Covid-19 made his argument urgent.

Greta Gerwig
Filmmaker

Originally known as a Hollywood actress and muse to Marriage Story director and partner Noah Baumbach, Gerwig has since proven herself to be a masterly screenwriter and director. Her 2017 coming-of-age drama Lady Bird won universal critical acclaim. That led to her most recent project adapting Louisa May Alcott’s classic novel Little Women for the big screen. At a time when everyone has been locked down with family, her work invites searching questions about our closest relationships. Her snubbing in Hollywood’s recent awards season attests to stubborn sexism in the industry, but the success of her films shows that things are changing.

Esther Duflo
Economist

Economics is often caricatured as being more interested in pounds than people and derided for getting lost in theoretical dead-ends. This Frenchwoman rescues the discipline from both charges. Duflo applies randomised trials to urgent policy questions with huge human significance in the developing world—questions such as how to encourage decent basic education, keep malaria at bay and, pertinently for our Covid-19 world, boost vaccine take-up. (She suggests incentives as modest as a bag of lentils.) At just 46 when she claimed the Nobel Prize in economics last year—together with husband and co-author Abhijit Banerjee, and Michael Kremer—she is an exceptionally young but richly deserving winner.

Sarah Gilbert
Vaccinologist

Decades of work on malaria, flu and then Mers readied this Oxford vaccinologist to do battle with the new coronavirus pandemic. Just as important was the preparatory thinking she had done about how to handle an unknown potential “disease X,” and the way she has galvanised her team. Moving beyond the old reliance on antibody responses, she pursues a proactive approach to vaccine design—tapping recombinant DNA techniques and honing in on T-cell responses. With safe-to-handle “viral vectors” speeding research, Gilbert energetically seeks a smart way through the slow protocols of academic medicine to speed up the application. Her work could—with luck—lead to a successful inoculation programme within months.

David Frum
Political commentator

Although still registered as a big-R Republican, David Frum is much less interested in party politics than little-R republicanism—his concern is the spirit of American democracy and the health of its republic. In his journalism the former George W Bush speechwriter has, from early on, been one of the clearest-sighted conservative critics of Trump—his personal lack of principle and venality, certainly, but also his potential to trash the standing of his office and the possibility of compromise. Frum’s biggest worry, outlined in his book Trumpcalypse, is less the disastrous 45th president winning in November than his political poison lingering for many years after his defeat.
Jürgen Habermas
Sociologist and philosopher

Having come of age listening to the Nuremberg trials, Habermas, now 91, has always been seized by the urgency of defending fundamental notions like an open public sphere and the idea of truth, through post-modern decades during which the academy grew complacent and self-indulgent. The last of the generation of Rawls and Foucault, both of whom he sparred with, his breathtaking range is on show in a new history of philosophy. Despite warning that “a post-truth democracy… would no longer be a democracy,” in dark times he still retains faith in the ability of human discussion to advance the common good.

NK Jemisin
Novelist

Science-fiction writer NK Jemisin broke records when all three novels in her Broken Earth trilogy won a prestigious Hugo Award for best novel between 2016 and 2018. Her work creates a fully-imagined universe to explore some of the great themes of our times—climate change, racial oppression and split identities. Jemisin, remarkably the first African American to win the Hugo, has criticised the publishing industry for not being diverse enough in genre fiction. Her new novel, The City We Became, is a love letter to a New York under threat from alien invasion.

Martin Hägglund
Atheist philosopher

Can you lead a spiritual life without being religious? The Swedish atheist thinker takes up the challenge in his book This Life. For Hägglund, the meaning of existence does not lie in an imaginary afterlife but in the fact of death: “the apprehension that we will die” makes meaningful the question of what we do with our time on earth. Erudite and provocative, Hägglund’s philosophy aims to plug the God-shaped hole gap in the lives of atheists, and has become more relevant as death once more stalks the developed western world. The Prospect review of his book wondered, though, whether the questions he asks have really been as foreign to religious thinking as he imagines.

Bong Joon-ho
Filmmaker

The South Korean filmmaker captured headlines—and hearts and minds—when he swept this year’s Oscars. He won four trophies, including best director and best picture for Parasite, an upstairs-downstairs tale about a poor family meeting a rich one. Bong’s cinema—which also includes dystopian train drama Snowpiercer and Netflix’s Okja—has long dealt with class conflict and the problems of contemporary capitalism, mixing the political with a playful mastery of tone and genre. In an industry dominated by superhero blockbusters, Bong’s global success proves there is widespread appetite for something new.
Respectable monetary policy died when central banks turned to the printing presses to battle the Great Recession, pursuing so-called Quantitative Easing (QE). Will the Covid-19 crisis see fiscal policy go the same way? Stephanie Kelton hopes so and is finding an audience—not only because there’s little appetite for more austerity. With interest rates and inflation on the floor, it’s harder to argue that governments directly creating money for social programmes would necessarily spell ruin. But a free lunch today will mean inflation tomorrow warn respectable economists—including some Keynesians. Like Keynes himself, though, Kelton resets the frame and goads conventional wisdom.

Rejecting earlier revisionism, China’s Xi Jinping has ruled that the Mao years and the reorientation towards state capitalism that followed are all one glorious chapter in the nation’s history. With China risen, does that make the brutal revolutionary newly-relevant not just at home, but also across the world? As Cambridge historian Lovell describes in her fine book *Maoism: A Global History*, the after-effects of his ideology spread across the planet, from Vietnam to Zanzibar. Also the author of a superb account of the Opium Wars, Lovell is an acute observer of the way history is used and abused by current regimes. Xi is no sincere believer in the dictums of Mao’s Little Red Book, but he does admire—and emulate—his authoritarian power play.

At just 33 years old, Russian-German pianist Igor Levit is a superstar interpreter of the classical canon—his complete Beethoven Sonatas came out earlier this year. He’s also unafraid of political gestures: at the 2017 Proms he played *Ode to Joy*, the European national anthem, in what was seen as a riposte to Brexit. In lockdown, he has pioneered live-streaming concerts on Twitter, dressed down in jeans and T-shirt, with explanations in German and English beforehand. (Check out his performance of Schubert’s late B-Flat Sonata.) Few others have done as much to democratise classical music while still maintaining the highest of standards.

The deepest assumptions shape day-to-day life without us noticing. Take a longer view, and you can spot them—and grasp how they can change. McCarthy’s work exposes the oppressive power of the housewife ideal. Many mothers have long been in paid employment, but in the years between commonplace domestic servants and ubiquitous domestic appliances, they were vilified for falling short as angels in the house. Only in the last 40 years, with the help of nurseries and other childcare, have working mothers ceased to be deemed aberrant. In the lockdown, all responsibility for children was thrown back to parents, and reports suggest the burden was unequally shared—underlining the enduring power of the tropes McCarthy identifies.

Lithwick is the outstanding scrutineer of the US Supreme Court, but qualifies as a true world thinker because of her subtle and penetrating analysis of the rule of law. Should November’s election descend into foul play and end up thrown over to the courts (like Bush vs Gore in 2000) Lithwick will be a must-read. But she qualifies as a true world thinker because of her subtle and penetrating take on the rule of law. She has written, including in *Prospect*, on how that ideal consists as much in a web of mores and codes as it does in any procedure or chain of command. Trump violates these, but so—increasingly—do other rulers on a planet where political corruption could become a second pandemic.

One of the most acute analysts of the 21st century’s often alarmingly personal politics is a novelist writing about Tudor England. In the concluding part of her Wolf Hall trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, Mantel continues her investigation into Thomas Cromwell, a canny practitioner of Machiavellian statecraft who attempted to align England with the Protestant princely states in Europe. That, as much as Henry VIII’s unpredictable sexual tastes, was the reason Cromwell’s career eventually unravelled. Mantel is also an eagle-eyed observer of the current royal family: her famous lecture on the Duchess of Cambridge is one of the works collected in a forthcoming collection, entitled *Mantel Pieces*. 
Jian-wei Pan  
Physicist

China’s status as a world leader in quantum communications—which harness the strange properties of quantum physics to send ultra-secure messages—owes much to the work of Jian-wei Pan at the University of Science and Technology in Hefei. After studying in Vienna with veteran physicist Anton Zeilinger, Pan seems to have acquired an uncanny ability to make even the most ambitious projects work. Known in China as the “father of quantum,” he recently masterminded the transmission of quantum-encrypted data via China’s Micius satellite from Beijing to Graz in Austria, thereby demonstrating how a global quantum information network might be enabled.

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Jenny Odell  
Artist

A Californian whose exhibitions have spotlighted objects discarded at landfills and the manufacturing roots of our everyday items, Odell calls us to observe the commonplace—with undivided attention. Her interests culminated in How to Do Nothing, a bestseller about the pleasures of resisting Big Tech’s commodification of our attention spans. It’s a philosophical meditation on what it means to live mindfully with nature at a time when powerful corporations want us to do anything but. When billions were suddenly confined to their homes this year (with nothing but social media to connect them with others), the need to rediscover how to be content doing nothing became self-evident.

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Branko Milanović  
Economist

Bean-counting can narrow horizons, but not for this Serbo-American number cruncher. Inequality used to be measured country-by-country, but he has pioneered analysis of the global income distribution, which he likens to an elephant, with a high back (fast wage-rises in mid-table China), low head (squeezed working-class wages in the west) and a rising trunk (the runaway pay of the pre-financial crisis global elite). Unlike many leftists, he diagnoses no general crisis of capitalism, instead focusing on its varieties, and the surprising way the restless insecurity of China’s political economy works to bolster growth. As Covid-19 accelerates China’s eclipse of the US, he is an indispensable guide.

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Thaddeus Metz  
Philosopher

This professor of philosophy at the University of Johannesberg is reimagining what it might mean to teach his subject in an African context. As well as the traditional syllabus (Plato etc), Metz has championed native African philosophy as an object of equal worth to study. He has defended the idea of a distinctive African moral theory based on “ubuntu,” one which values harmonious relationships and human solidarity. It should, he argues, be taken just as seriously as the work of Kant or utilitarianism. That Metz is a white American makes the project, often described as “decolonising” the curriculum, all the more intriguing.

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Olivette Otele  
Historian of slavery

Born in Cameroon and raised in France, Olivette Otele was appointed professor of the history of slavery at Bristol University last autumn—having become, at Bath Spa, the UK’s first black female history professor just the year before. She has been a keen analyst of Bristol’s impassioned debate over its long associations with slavery. In reaction to the pulling down of Edward Colston’s statue, she wrote, “many other slave traders are still celebrated in Bristol, while poverty, racism and all forms of inequalities are, more than ever, in urgent need of being tackled.” Her book African Europeans: An Untold Story will be published this October.

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Timothy Morton  
Philosopher

Living in the Anthropocene turns out to require a new, less anthropocentric, vocabulary. Morton—an English professor at Rice University, Houston—provides one. A proponent of object-oriented ontology (OOO), Morton argues that “nature” or “the environment” does not, in fact, exist as we think of it, as something separate from or encompassing of civilisation. He suggests instead that all objects, from rocks to trees, live in equal and interdependent co-existence with humans. Counting singer Björk, artist Olafur Eliasson and curator and critic Hans Ulrich Obrist among his fans and collaborators, he is exerting a rare and a far-reaching impact on our intellectual and cultural imagination.
Lisa Piccirillo
Mathematician

The “Conway knot” problem had stumped some of the world’s brightest minds for more than five decades—until graduate student Lisa Piccirillo solved it in a week. In mathematical theory, knot formations can have a property called “sliceness,” being in effect a “slice” of a higher dimensional knot. But no one knew whether the Conway knot did. Piccirillo proved it does not. Astonished colleagues say she took some convincing to recognise the scale of her achievement. Her proof was published in the *Annals of Mathematics* journal this year and MIT rushed to give her a permanent position.

Mark Post
Lab meat pioneer

“My goal,” says Dutch pharmacologist Mark Post, “is to replace the entirety of livestock production with cultured meat.” It’s an audacious target—but one that has attracted the investment of Google co-founder Sergey Brin. It is seven years since Brin helped fund a $325,000 burger made from in-vitro meat, created in a lab with stem cells. Now Post’s company Mosa Meat plans to make commercially viable cultured meat available to the general public by 2021. (Get your steak via a 3D printer.) It will have huge benefits for the environment—fewer cows will mean less noxious emissions—to say nothing of the animals saved from slaughter, but Post acknowledges that palates may have to adjust before McDonald’s makes the switch.

Thomas Piketty
Social scientist

The Frenchman who woke the world up to inequality is back with *Capital and Ideology*, an awe-inspiring tome that explains the outsize riches of elites—from ancient Hindustan to modern Silicon Valley—in terms of the institutions and ideas that support “inequality regimes.” The analysis is always thoughtful, even if some conclusions feel politically naive. But as Covid-19 pushes governments everywhere into the red, Piketty’s long view on public debt is urgently practical. Debt can be answered by repressing and extracting from the masses (Britain after the Napoleonic wars), wished away with inflation (post-war Britain) or sustainably managed by taxing wealth (post-war Germany).

Carlota Perez
Economic historian

As a stalled economy splutters back to life, is it doomed to lapse into bad habits—or can we create something smarter? This Venezuelan is a student of all the successive cycles of innovation—brainwave, bubble, bust and (finally) build—since the industrial revolution. Like Schumpeter, Perez sees the destruction of the old and creation of the new as inextricably linked. She fears the ecological brick wall; as she says, “we’d need three planets” for China to match US consumption patterns. But far from giving up on growth, she spied a chance to speed it through a green transition and a new consumerism focused on experiences, exercise and wellbeing.

Sally Rooney
Novelist

The 29-year-old Irish literary phenomenon is seemingly unstoppable. *Normal People*, her second runaway hit after *Conversations with Friends*, is a sparsely written love story which has sold an astonishing half a million copies worldwide—a number set only to increase after she co-wrote a critically-acclaimed BBC adaptation featuring two handsome lead actors. Though praised by critics for her attention to the technological zeitgeist, Rooney is razor-sharp on the age-old interface between class and culture, and her novel is at its heart a simple story of how early passion can mature into something quite different. The world awaits what she will do next. No pressure.

“As a graduate student, Piccirillo solved a knotty problem that had stumped top mathematicians for half a century. She took some convincing to recognise the scale of her achievement”

THE TRANSGENDER ACTIVIST AND AUTHOR IS THE FIRST OPENLY TRANS WOMAN RAISED IN A HASSIDIC JEWISH COMMUNITY. HER 2019 MEMOIR, *BECOMING EVE*, TRACKS HER JOURNEY FROM ULTRA-ORTHOX RABBI IN BROOKLYN TO RENEGADE NEW YORK POLITICAL SCIENCE COLLEGE STUDENT, AND FINALLY 27-YEAR-OLD GLOBALLY RECOGNIZED AUTHOR AND ADVOCATE. THOUGH STEIN LEFT HER COMMUNITY IN 2012 AND NOW IDENTIFIES AS AN ATHEIST, SHE HAS AGAIN EMBRACED THE RABBI TITLE AND ASPECTS OF THE ROLE, AND CONTINUES TO ENGAGE CRITICALLY WITH JUDAISM: “WHAT I’M HOPING IS THAT BY SHARING MY STORY, OTHERS IN THE SAME SITUATION WILL REALISE THAT YOU CAN HAVE YOUR NAME IN A SYNAGOGUE,” SHE HAS SAID.

“Waldman stands out as a mind who can grapple with every side of the multifaceted problem of privacy in a digital age: technological, legal and sociological”

Marina Tabassum
Architect

At the forefront of creating buildings in tune with their natural environments, this Bangladeshi architect is also embracing the design challenges posed by what we are collectively doing to the planet. She recently exhibited lightweight houses made from locally-sourced materials that perch on stilts and can be moved when the waters rise—an increasingly common occurrence in her native country. She designed the Bait Ur Rouf mosque in the capital Dhaka, made of terracotta brick—echoing the mosques from the Sultanate era—which is built on a raised platform, again to protect against flooding. The mosque won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

Olga Tokarczuk
Writer

Winner of the 2019 Nobel Prize in literature, Polish novelist Tokarczuk writes works which are experimental, ambitious—and also bestselling. Among them are the travel book *Flights* and *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, a dark feminist comedy said to be inspired by William Blake. Her magnum opus finally comes out in English in 2021, six years after a mixed—and dramatic—reception at home. Praised by critics but loathed by nationalists, *The Book of Jacob* tells the persecution-strewn story of the 18th-century Jewish messianic figure Jacob Frank, unsettling those who would rather wish away the demons of Poland’s past. As politicians deepen their dalliance with nationalist myths, authors who bust them become invaluable.

Stephen Wertheim
Historian

From his perch at Columbia, Wertheim has a distinctive beat—“the United States in the world.” It is an ideal angle from which to make sense of the fast-shifting tectonic plates of political geography, and he’s the most interesting expert rethinking US foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold War, he believes, the US has repeatedly blown the chance to promote peace and the common good, instead continuing down an anachronistic path of military supremacy and aggression. The outcome has been not only avoidable warfare overseas, but impoverished debate at home. With polls finding younger Americans support Wertheim’s anti-war stance, his ideas could soon become mainstream.

Philippe Van Parijs
Godfather of the UBI movement

Dreams of “incomes for all” trace way back—Thomas Paine proposed one scheme. But even before the government picked up the wage bill for millions of furloughed workers, Universal Basic Income was an ambition coming of age. The rapid automation of labour switches the question from how national income can be earned, to how it might be distributed. Today’s young UBI enthusiasts draw on the books and tap the networks of this Belgian polymath, who championed it before it was fashionable. For decades, he has warned that our proclaimed freedoms to start businesses or raise children count for nothing without the real freedom that comes with a basic income.

Ari Ezra Waldman
Privacy expert

Amid our networked lives, with video cameras in every pocket, worries about privacy—from “revenge porn” to the Edward Snowden revelations—were mounting fast, even before the intrusive demands of Covid-19 “track-and-trace” systems. Waldman stands out as a mind who can grapple with every side—technological, legal and sociological—of the multifaceted problem of privacy in a digital age. His insight is simple: personal information is something we’ve always been happy to share in the context of a trusting relationship. But its implication is disruptive: tech giants like Facebook, which can currently X-ray our personal lives for their own ends, should be subject to something akin to the confidentiality requirements constraining doctors and lawyers.
Joshua Wong
Hong Kong activist

This 23-year-old activist-politician has become an icon for Hong Kong’s independence movement. In 2011, at just 14, he co-founded Scholarism, a student movement protesting proposed school curriculum changes deemed to assist the Chinese Communist Party. In 2014, he shot to global attention as one of the leading figures of the Umbrella Movement. His hopes for Hong Kong have now been shuttered, by events as well as by personal struggles—he has been jailed and denied entry to several countries. “In the future, I might not be jailed in Hong Kong anymore, I might be jailed in China,” he told CNBC recently. His new book *Unfree Speech: The Threat to Global Democracy and Why We Must Act* is a timely wake-up call.

Ed Yong
Science writer

When the coronavirus hit, few science writers could claim to say “I told you so.” Except, that is, the *Atlantic’s* Ed Yong, who in 2018 wrote a prescient article entitled “The Next Plague is Coming. Is America Ready?” His regular essays on Covid-19 have become essential reading for clear, informed analysis of a still-mysterious virus. In June he published a sobering account of how for some sufferers of the disease recovery has been very slow—and how it may indeed become a chronic illness. He’s also been calmly excoriating of Trump’s poor response, which has led to the US having the highest death toll in the world.

Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz
Biologist

The exciting goal in biology is no longer just cataloguing genes and correlating them with traits, but understanding exactly how gene activity and inter-cellular communications interact to build a baby organism. Polish-British biologist Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz is at the forefront of that effort. Her Cambridge team has shown how embryo-like structures can be made “from scratch” in the lab using embryonic stem cells (which can become any tissue) and other types of stem cell. She’s been able to grow human embryos in vitro right up to the current 14-day legal limit. Aside from its profound medical implications, her work raises philosophical questions about what it means to be human.

The voting

The public vote determined the identity of *Prospect’s* top 10 of 2020. Continue reading to find out the winner.
It’s a disease of the body, but it has redefined the requirements for a great mind. In the last issue, we renewed a Prospect tradition and identified 50 top world thinkers. It was an all-new list for the Covid-19 age, since the mood called for thinking of a different sort—less chin-stroking, more hands on. Then 20,000-odd votes were cast and counted in a public ballot. The results are in, and represent a landslide win for the practical minds party.

The top spot was overwhelmingly secured by a figure who—on first blush—is as far from a caricature intellectual of the Jean-Paul Sartre variety as you can get. That’s not quite right since, like Sartre, KK Shailaja is a communist, albeit from a party created to keep its distance from Soviet Moscow. It helps run the state of Kerala in south India, where Shailaja or “Teacher,” as she is fondly nicknamed due to a previous occupation, is the indefatigable health minister.

So deft was her handling of a 2018 outbreak of the deadly Nipah disease that it was commemorated in a film, Virus. In 2020, she was the right woman in the right place. When Covid-19 was still “a China story” in January, she not only accurately foresaw its inevitable arrival, but also fully grasped the implications.

She rapidly got the WHO’s full “test, trace and isolate” drill implemented in the state, and bought crucial time by getting a grip of the airports, and containing the first cases to arrive on Chinese flights. Of course the virus returned, but there was rigorous surveillance and quarantine—sometimes in makeshift structures. The public messages have been consistent, and Shailaja follows them to the letter, with social distancing in all official meetings (which can go on until 10pm) and restricting herself to a Zoom-only relationship with her grandchildren.

The votes have been counted and the results are in. Our top 10 is full of practical-minded thinkers for the Covid-19 age—and the victor is the most practical of them all.
Cases and deaths were kept remarkably low into the summer, although as it drew to a close they began to grow fast—just as Shailaja had warned they would. Still, as we go to press, confirmed Covid-19 deaths in the state—which has average incomes an order of magnitude lower than Britain’s, and just over half the population—were not yet 1 per cent of ours. And hopefully Shailaja’s masterclass in public administration will boost the odds in the next and more difficult phase.

The second spot, earned in a similar way, went to Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s prime minister, whose governing “ethos of kindness” was drawing interest as a refreshing (if hazy) alternative to neo-liberalism even before it showed practical results in keeping a lid on the crisis. Just behind her is the Bangladeshi architect Marina Tabassum, another woman applying her mind to a pressing practical challenge, although in her case it is climate change: she designs houses on stilts to keep families safe from rising waters.

Beyond here, the list gets more eclectic, with intellectuals of a more traditional stripe being represented by the African-American philosopher Cornel West (4th), the historian of slavery at Bristol Olivette Otele (6th) and the Belgian polymath Philippe Van Parijs (8th). But these thinkers, too, drew support for practical engagement with the world—Van Parijs, for example, for his decades of advocacy for a universal basic income, and West for his recent interventions on Black Lives Matter. Related concern about state brutality also propels two expert advocates up the list: Ilona Szabó de Carvalho (5th), who set up the internationally-influential Igarapé Institute, which champions citizen-led security, and the American prison abolitionist, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (7th). Scientists fill out the rest of the top ten—Danish pharmacologist Mark Post (9th) and Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz (10th), who respectively work on lab-grown meat and lab-grown embryos, crucial endeavours for emissions and for medicine.

“Seven of the top 10 are female, with not one ‘Anglo-Saxon’ thinker”

Several “all-purpose” public intellectuals—like Jared Diamond, say, and Jürgen Habermas—were on our list, but did not get far in the voting this year. That may or may not be connected to an extraordinary picture on gender. Fifteen years ago, *Prospect* was reasonably criticised when its top 10 Global Thinkers featured just 10 women; today seven of the top 10 are female. Only a minority of them are white, with not one “Anglo-Saxon,” despite there being several in the top 50. We’d like to think people vote on ideas rather than demographics, but in the mood of 2020 the male and pale do—whether fairly or not—seem to be rated as stale.

*Tom Clark is editor of Prospect*

**The rest of the top 10**

2

Jacinda Ardern
Prime minister of New Zealand

3

Marina Tabassum
Architect

4

Cornel West
Philosopher

5

Ilona Szabó de Carvalho
Political scientist

6

Olivette Otele
Historian of slavery

7

Ruth Wilson Gilmore
Prison abolitionist

8

Philippe Van Parijs
Godfather of the UBI movement

9

Mark Post
Lab meat pioneer

10

Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz
Biologist

**Who we missed**

Boiling down the best thinkers in the world to just 50 is an invidious task: many deserving names just missed out, or perhaps didn’t occur to us at all. So we asked anyone who voted to tell us who warranted a place.

Looking through the hundreds of suggested names, a few stood out. Susan Neiman, whose book *Learning From the Germans* investigates how some nations atone for their historical sins and others do not, is a timely choice. So is Anthony Fauci, the leading member of the US’s Covid-19 task force, who has become an emblem of scientific rationality and is unafraid to challenge the current White House occupant. Also mentioned was Christian Drosten, a German virologist praised for leading his country’s response to the virus, who has said that Chancellor Angela Merkel did well because “she’s a scientist and can handle numbers.” Nobody, as it happens, thought to suggest any of the equivalent scientists in the UK.

Few politicians were suggested this year—apart from disturbingly odd choices. There was little chance we would have picked Kim Jong-un or Saudi Arabia’s Mohammd bin Salman. India’s prime minister Narendra Modi is certainly driven by ideas—though Hindu nationalism isn’t one we rate very highly here at *Prospect*.

On the arts front, Michaela Coel, the writer and star of the BBC’s recent hit show about sex, consent and creativity, *I May Destroy You*, would have been a strong contender if we’d been compiling the list just a few weeks later. Someone else we missed was Rana Ayyub, the Indian investigative journalist, who has written fearlessly about the government’s crackdown in Kashmir.

Being a liberal magazine—in the broadest sense—doesn’t mean we can ignore critics of liberalism. US writer Patrick Deneen has written trenchantly about how highly individualistic, free-market capitalism has destroyed the west’s cultural unity and the possibility of political solidarity. Oxford’s Faisal Devji, not an ideological bedfellow of Deneen to say the least, works on the way western colonialism has shaped our ideas about religion. I was pleased to see Charles Taylor suggested: the Canadian philosopher’s short book *The Ethics of Authenticity* was published in 1992 but it is strikingly relevant today, as it argues that while liberalism at its most excessive can be damaging, we shouldn’t forget its admirable achievements.

Finally, a mention to the bizarre outliers. I can’t tell you why someone might choose Lester Piggott or Terence Trent D’Arby as their thinkers of 2020. But since it’s allowed me to put them in the same sentence, I’m glad they did.

*Sameer Rahim is managing editor of Prospect*