



# Right place, right time: Luck, geography, and politics

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## ABSTRACT

On 12th May 2020, Mass Observation collected c5,000 diaries from people across the UK. Many of these diaries mention luck and many of these luck stories are geography stories. Geographers, though, have not written much about luck. In this article, I review the literature on luck from within and beyond geography to construct a working definition and geographical approach to luck. The working definition describes luck as chance, fortuitous, unexpected events that were beyond the control of those for whom they are now significant. The geographical approach distinguishes four geographical aspects of luck: the geometry of luck; lucky places; right place, right time; and the practical sphere. Addressing the diaries, I consider accounts of events and outcomes that appear lucky/unlucky according to my definition and approach. I also consider apparent uses of luck as a cultural resource. Many diarists used ideas of luck to make sense of privilege and suffering. This leads to a discussion of luck in political philosophy and an argument that luck as a cultural resource also has potential as a political resource. It could provide a basis for popular critique of meritocracy and popular justification for redistribution. If geographers are interested in such a politics – or in formal theories of causation, or in how people understand their situation and relations (their folk theories of agency and responsibility) – the topic of luck might reward further study.

## 1. Introduction

On 12th May 2020, a few months into the Covid-19 pandemic, Mass Observation asked people from across the UK to keep a day-diary. Roughly 5,000 people responded and sent diaries to the Mass Observation Archive. Reading those diaries, I was struck by how often they mention luck.

Sometimes, these mentions appear to be just filler ('Luckily for me...'). Sometimes, they appear as false modesty draped over privilege ('I'm lucky to have...'). And sometimes, they appear to reference superstition ('Fingers crossed!'). But often, mentions of luck in the diaries appear to be serious, honest, profane attempts to explain variation in how the pandemic was experienced. Diarists saw themselves as lucky to be locked down in a particular locality with particular amenities and services, or unlucky the pandemic arrived at a particular moment in their lives – when they were gearing up for exams, or had just become self-employed, or were due an operation to relieve pain. They saw themselves as unlucky if they caught the virus and got seriously ill when following the same risk-management practices as others, or lucky compared to 'those less fortunate'.

In this article, I try to make sense of this 'luck talk' from three starting points. First, many of the luck stories told by the diarists were geography

stories. Good luck involved fortuitously finding oneself in the right place at the right time. Bad luck involved the opposite: by chance, accident, or coincidence – arbitrarily, unpredictably, and through no fault of one's own – finding oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet geographers have not had much to say about luck (or synonyms like chance and fortune).

Second, from what geographers *have* said about luck, and what many non-geographers have said too, it would appear that luck matters for geography, and geography matters for luck. Luck matters if geographers wish to explain life chances (following accidents of birth in pre-existing distributions of risks and resources) or regional uneven development (following historical accidents). It matters for geographers' theories of causation, if such theories are to be non-reductive and to accommodate more than structure and agency. Luck matters if geographers wish to understand how people see themselves in relation to others. Luck is a cultural resource or folk concept (Davison et al 1991). People use it when making sense of their lives. They use luck stories to navigate uncertainty (Gordon 2023). Luck thinking informs their sense of agency and responsibility – and so is relevant, for example, to questions of governance (especially governance through behaviour change). Luck is a frame through which people view their relations. People compare themselves to more or less fortunate others (Tiegen 2019). Luck also

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matters if geographers care about social justice. It is a component of prominent theories of social justice (e.g. Rawls 1971), where it connects to questions of circumstance, responsibility, and compensation.

Third, in order to proceed with any discussion about luck and geography, there is a need to clarify what is meant by luck. Does luck mean the same as apparent synonyms like chance and fortune? Does modern luck differ from ancient luck? How does luck relate to probability and control? Is luck just randomness that could be explained by complexity science? Is luck objective (a factor explaining outcomes) or subjective (the perception that luck explains outcomes) – or both? These questions and more are considered in Sections 2 and 3, where definitions are provided, including a working definition of luck as *chance, fortuitous, unexpected events that were beyond the control of those for whom they are now significant*.

Section 2 reviews luck as it appears in publications that self-identify as geography publications, or by authors who self-identify as geographers. While very helpful, few of these publications provide much theoretical discussion of luck as it relates to geography, let alone a fully developed geographical theory of luck. Section 3, therefore, reviews luck as it appears in sociology (where more has been written about luck), philosophy (where luck appears as a formal concept), and literary studies (where luck appears as a folk concept). In addition to definitions, I draw from these reviews four geographical aspects of luck that together constitute the beginnings of a geographical approach to luck: the geometry of luck; lucky places; right place, right time; and the practical sphere (Section 4).

Section 5 introduces Mass Observation and the 12th May 2020 diaries. The diaries are particular in the sense they were kept by volunteers at a moment of extreme uncertainty. They are more broadly relevant, however, because: the pandemic was a moment of extreme uncertainty within a broader period of heightened uncertainty (late modernity – Turnbough 2024); among the diarists can be found a wide range of positions, experiences, and voices; and in the diaries can be found evidence of objective luck impacting the lives of individuals, but also luck as a shared cultural resource apparently circulating widely in British society in the twenty-first century.

Sections 6 and 7 use quotations to demonstrate how luck appears in the diaries. While Section 6 illustrates some of the geographical aspects of luck introduced previously, Section 7 considers how diarists used luck to make sense of their position in society. This leads to a discussion of luck in political philosophy and the potential of luck as not only a cultural resource, but also a political resource.

## 2. Luck in geography

There has been plenty of work in physical geography on randomness. In recent decades, however, such work has mostly drawn from complexity science, where randomness is approached as an effect of background ordering processes; a hidden pattern that one day scientists will have sufficient capability to observe and predict (Crutchfield 2012). There is also some research in evolutionary economic geography on chance. Here, the work of economic historians like Paul David (1985) – on path dependent sequences that often begin with random, non-systematic, chance happenings (historical accidents) – has led some geographers to propose chance as a factor in the location of new industries during moments of technological breakthrough (e.g. Boschma 1997). However, since the late 1990s, evolutionary economic geography has tended to focus less on chance and initial historical accidents, and more on other factors (existing industrial structures, creative regional agents) and subsequent path dependence, including learning, agglomeration economies, and lock in (see Coe 2011).

Reading for this article, I found three geography studies focused directly on what might be termed ‘objective’ luck (a factor explaining outcomes) and a further six on ‘subjective’ luck (the perception that luck explains outcomes). Studying asylum seekers dispersed across the UK, Burridge and Gill (2017) found that being assigned to a particular case

worker or having one’s case heard by a particular judge – both matters of being in the right place at the right time – played a central role in shaping outcomes for asylum seekers. Burridge and Gill do not attempt to theorise luck, geography, and politics, but an earlier study made important steps in this direction. Kearns and Reid-Henry (2009) studied the geography of longevity, which varies by country. They note how risks and resources are not distributed evenly across the surface of the globe, and how people face different levels of public health security, nutrition, and pathogenic challenge – different contextual constraints and consequent life chances – depending on accident of birthplace (plus limited choice of residence). They call this ‘geographical luck’.

Such an approach to luck – focused on geography, accident of birthplace, and longevity – fits with a broader literature on geography and ‘life chances’ (e.g. Dorling et al., 2000), in which mortality varies by region due to medical factors, but also social and behavioural factors. ‘Geographical luck’, in Kearns and Reid-Henry, also fits with earlier work by David Smith (2000) on ‘the place of good fortune’. Smith’s focus was familiar: the uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure, ‘the chance of birth’ within that distribution, the initial advantage gained by that chance (or disadvantage lost), and resulting inequalities. Smith drew from John Rawls and liberalism to proceed. The implications were radical. If initial (dis)advantage was not earned, then it was not deserved, and resultant inequalities should be equalised (‘social justice as equalisation’). Kearns and Reid-Henry drew similar implications, also influenced by Rawls. If longevity is as a matter of fortune, then long lives are unearned and short lives are unjust. Injustice of this kind should be addressed by affirmative action where possible, or at least compensation.

In Section 7, we shall see how my own consideration of luck also led to Rawls (his theory of justice, but additionally his appreciation of ‘public political culture’). In Section 4, we shall see how geographical luck, the place of fortune, and life chances – as they relate to distributions, contexts, and accidents of birth or location – make up one geographical aspect of luck: ‘right place, right time’. In Section 3, we shall see that luck, fortune, and chance are close synonyms that overlap in both etymology and everyday colloquial argot – so the terminological choices covered in this and the previous paragraph should not detain us.

Returning to luck in the geography literature, in addition to these articles discussing objective luck, I found a few studies where subjective luck appeared prominently in interviews with: farmers, about successful farming in England and Wales (Enticott 2008), Aotearoa New Zealand (Enticott et al 2021), and India (Matthan 2022); miners, about successful diamond mining in India (Lahiri-Dutt and Chowdhury 2018); male Ghanaian youth, about football migration to Europe (Esson 2015); and African migrants in Ukraine, about their migration trajectories (Gladkova and Mazzucato 2017). These studies provide numerous insights. As a cultural resource, luck does cultural and political work, allowing farmers to worry less about disease spread and to refuse responsibility for disease control (Enticott et al 2021), or allowing miners to perform versions of masculinity connected to gambling and sport (Lahiri-Dutt and Chowdhury 2018). Furthermore, the capacity to act on luck – to ‘try one’s luck’ or ‘take one’s chances’ – depends on financial support and personal social networks (Gladkova and Mazzucato 2017). It depends on what Matthan (2022) calls the ‘means of speculation’ – which, in the case of Matthan’s onion farmers, describes price information and storage facilities.

All of this is very helpful. However, few of these publications provide much theoretical discussion of luck as it relates to geography, let alone a fully developed geographical theory of luck. Kearns and Reid-Henry (2009) perhaps come closest, but luck could be more clearly defined in their study, as could the relationship between geographical luck (the geography of longevity) and structure (states and capital). Moreover, Kearns and Reid-Henry elaborate six ‘dimensions of geographical luck’, but the alternative label they use (at certain points in their article) – ‘dimensions of interconnectedness’ – seems more appropriate, since their otherwise valuable discussion is more focused on

interconnectedness (trade, care, aid, solidarity etc.) than luck.

### 3. Luck in sociology, philosophy, and literary studies

If geographers have not had much to say about luck, the same can be said of sociologists, who often start their articles about luck with precisely this point. However, the fact that numerous articles exist with such a beginning suggests that sociologists have thought more about luck – or at least written more – than geographers.

Mike Smith (1993) provides a helpful summary of sociology's engagement with chance – and, indirectly, with luck-as-chance – over the last century. Classical sociology recognised the importance of chance in social reality, but denied it a place in sociological analysis, the objective of which was to reveal societal regularities determined by system constraints or understood as part of a particular logical process. For example, while Max Weber accepted that chance events happen, and recognised chance causation, he described the task of sociology – if it was to be a credible science – as bringing order to chaos, which meant focusing on 'meaningful actions' (i.e. rational actions). This view held in sociology – whether among systems theorists (focused on system constraints) or interactionists (focused on meaningful/rational social action) – until late modernity when structural fragmentation and cultural flexibility meant sociologists became more interested in chance. In France, Raymond Boudon (1982) was particularly influential. He identified two forms of unforeseen indeterminacy: the fortuitous impact between two or more discrete sequences of logically related activities/causal chains (a phenomenon already familiar to historians; also, a starting point for 'the geometry of luck' discussed in Section 4); and where the self-interested actions of agents in settings of open choice result in outcomes unanticipated by all (a phenomenon already familiar to game theorists). In Britain, Anthony Giddens (1984) was particularly influential. Like Boudon, he identified two forms of contingent unanticipated events: the impact of external sequences on internal system developments; and the unforeseen consequences of actions taken within systems themselves. By the 1990s, at least some sociologists were no longer treating chance as residual. They were beginning to study chance alongside structure and agency (in tri-partite theories of causation).

Like the geographical studies cited in Section 2, sociological studies since the 1990s have mostly focused on how participants use the concept of luck in interviews. Sociologists have reported interviews with: young people, in which luck, chance, and fortune featured prominently as interchangeable terms to explain transitions to adulthood, university, and work (Archer et al 2023, Thomson et al 2002, Turnbough 2024, Ye and Nylander 2021); workers, in which luck and serendipity featured prominently as interchangeable terms to explain job matching (McDonald 2010); academics, in which luck/chance featured prominently as a factor in successful academic careers (Davies and Pham 2023, Loveday 2018); and scientists, in which luck/serendipity featured prominently as a factor in scientific discoveries (Yakub 2018).

Focused on both 'the social construction of luck' and 'the real effects of luck' (Sauder 2020), these studies have generated insights reminiscent of, but also additional to, those already mentioned in Section 2. Outcomes result from interactions between agency (control), structure (opportunity), and luck (chance). Luck talk, therefore, is not simply a discursive resource allowing people to perform modesty or mask privilege (Davies and Pham 2023, Ye and Nylander 2021). Nevertheless, 'lucky breaks' present themselves to certain people e.g. job seekers with certain personal, contextual, and relational characteristics (McDonald 2010); or scientists with broad social networks of weak ties (Yakub 2018). And how people respond to lucky breaks depends on the resources available to them (Thomson et al 2002). Some people have the capital to capitalise on lucky breaks, so lucky breaks produce 'domino effects' for these people, whereas other people lack such capital, meaning that lucky breaks only produce 'pendulum effects' for this latter group (Archer et al 2023).

This review of luck as it appears in sociology, in addition to the

discussion in Section 2, raises the question of definitions. So far, luck has been aligned with chance, accident, coincidence, serendipity, fortune (and also arbitrariness, indeterminacy, unpredictability, unexpectedness). Luck has been distinguished from superstition. It has also been distinguished from: agency, control, rationality, intention, choice, responsibility; and structure, opportunity/constraint, privilege/oppression (so that luck is able to interact with agency and structure to shape outcomes and experiences). Finally, objective and subjective luck have been distinguished – though both have real effects.

How to proceed in addressing this question of definitions? In what remains of this section, I consider definitions of luck in philosophy (luck as a formal concept) and representations of luck in literature, cinema, and the broader cultural field (luck as a folk concept). I then clarify my working definition.

There are multiple accounts of luck in philosophy. Some of these fit well to luck as it appears in geography and sociology. One example is the probability account of luck (Rescher 1995), which holds that luck is the positive (or negative) outcome for someone of a chance development. One is lucky when, in a situation of uncertain outcome, one fares better than one has a right to expect (and this 'right to expect' is probabilistic in nature). Another example is the lack of control account of luck (Riggs 2019), which holds that luck happens to you when something happens that you have no control over – whether in terms of intention or ability – and that is significant to you. (The latter qualifier is needed because individuals have no control over most events in the universe.)

However, some philosophical accounts of luck complicate the previous discussion; especially the way luck is distinguished by some geographers and sociologists from other social factors (structure, opportunity/constraint, privilege/oppression) – a move allowing for claims that lucky opportunities present themselves to privileged people, while privileged people respond to lucky opportunities by mobilising resources. Thomas Nagel's (1979) account of luck is perhaps the best example here. In debates about moral luck, most notably with Bernard Williams, Nagel distinguished four types of luck. Resultant moral luck describes when someone receives praise or blame for outcomes that were not entirely within their control. Circumstantial moral luck describes when someone receives praise or blame for actions that would not have happened if the person had not been in that place at that time (faced with those particular opportunities and constraints). Constitutive moral luck describes when someone receives praise or blame for actions that would not have happened if the person had not been born with or developed certain dispositions and character traits (attributable more to genes or environment than to control and choice). Causal moral luck describes when someone receives praise or blame for actions that were determined in a deterministic natural world.

If we discount the extreme determinism of causal moral luck, we are left with two accounts of luck that blur the distinction between luck, agency, and structure. In circumstantial and constitutive luck, one's opportunities and constraints, along with one's dispositions and character traits, are not independent variables influencing whether people receive lucky breaks, or how people respond to lucky breaks, but are themselves matters of luck. Feminist philosophers (e.g. Tessman 2005) have termed such luck, where it is generated by social systems of oppression and privilege, 'systemic luck'. I return to this broader definition of luck in Section 7 when discussing John Rawls (1971), for whom a theory of justice must address both 'natural chance' (someone's 'fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities') and the 'contingency of social circumstances' (p12). I return to circumstantial luck in Section 4, where it approximates the geographical aspect of luck termed 'right place, right time'.

For now, the task is to find a way out of these philosophical arguments. This can be done by turning away from luck as a formal concept and towards luck as a folk concept. Robert Gordon's (2023) study of 'luck stories' is helpful in this regard. For Gordon, luck stories are one device people use to navigate uncertainty in the world. Ancient luck stories focused on turning uncertainties towards propitious outcomes;

harnessing contingency towards lucky ends; icons and talismans like horseshoes and four-leafed clovers; legends and myths like those of the Roman goddess Fortuna (who turned the wheel of fate). By contrast, modern luck stories retain some of these motifs, but relegate fate, destiny, predestination, the Gods etc. to the background, leaving the foreground populated by chance. For Gordon, additionally, we should not worry too much about distinguishing between luck, chance, and fortune (or other near synonyms: happenstance, coincidence, accident). They overlap in both etymology and everyday colloquial argot. Luck, from the Dutch *luc* and the Middle Low German *lücke*, is defined by the *OED* as ‘The chance occurrence of situations or events either favourable or unfavourable to a person’s interests; the sum of chance events affecting (favourably or unfavourably) a person’s interests or circumstances; a person’s apparent tendency to have good or ill fortune’ (cited in [Gordon 2023: 18-19](#)). Fortune comes from the French *fortune* and the Latin *fortuna*, where the root *fors* refers to chance. As for chance, it comes from the French *cheance* and the Latin *cadentia*, where the root *cadere* refers to falling, befalling, happening, incident, accident, coincidence.

I am now in a position to clarify a set of working definitions for the rest of this article. There is a primary definition of luck that is shared across much of geography, sociology, philosophy, and literary studies, where *luck describes chance, fortuitous, unexpected events that were beyond the control of those for whom they are now significant*. Then there are two secondary definitions: a minimalist definition found more in social science, where luck describes a third aspect of causation, alongside and distinguishable from agency and structure (so that luck interacts with agency and structure to shape outcomes and experiences); and a maximalist definition found more in (moral) philosophy, where luck covers a larger part of causation because much of what we think of as agency or structure is actually a matter of luck (shaped, to some extent at least, by genes and circumstance).

#### 4. Geography in luck

In this section, I draw out from the above discussion – and the broader literatures on which it is based – four geographical aspects of luck that together might constitute the beginnings of a geographical approach to luck.

##### 4.1. The geometry of luck

One geographical aspect can be seen in Boudon’s first form of unforeseen indeterminacy: the fortuitous impact between two or more discrete sequences of logically related activities/causal chains. John [Mattausch \(2003\)](#), after Boudon, who in turn was drawing from Augustin Cournot, terms this ‘the Cournot Effect’. Two causal series can be predetermined (e.g. a slate falling from a badly repaired roof, and a person walking their usual route to work), but the convergence of these two causal series (an event) can produce chance effects (i.e. someone hit by a falling slate). Ivan [Ermakoff \(2015\)](#) terms this version of chance, resulting from the intersection of two or more independent causal series, ‘happenstance’. Importantly, for my purposes, [Gordon \(2023\)](#) derives from this version of chance a ‘geometry of luck’. It is a vector; an incident along a line, or an intersection of lines. This geometry includes the forking-path motif in modern fiction (named after Jorge Luis Borges’s story, ‘The garden of forking paths’ – *ibid*). It might accommodate the ‘path’ imaginaries of evolutionary economic geography, where path development sometimes begins with historical accidents.

##### 4.2. Lucky places

A second geographical aspect of luck is also discussed by [Gordon \(2023\)](#). Reading (or watching) luck stories from the long twentieth century, he notices lucky places: particular spaces where luck seems to be triggered into action. Examples include Rick’s bar in *Casablanca* (a destination for refugees from the Second World War, looking to transit

to the New World – if they are lucky – and crossing paths in the meantime), and the characteristic non-places of modernity: airports, train stations, planes, trains (where chance encounters take place, as in *Brief Encounter* or *Before Sunrise*, and where forked paths are presented, as in *Sliding Doors*).

##### 4.3. Right place, right time

A third aspect is again discussed helpfully by [Mattausch \(2003\)](#), drawing this time from Jared Diamond. Chance effects can result from events, but they can also result from distributions e.g. the distribution of environmental factors, which made human development across the world an effect of chance (because humans had no control over that distribution). [Ermakoff \(2015\)](#) adds to this. He sees contingency generated by environmental factors (the constraints and possibilities presented by particular situations in time and space i.e. contexts) and temporal factors (order, sequence, evolution, enchainment – where what happens next depends on what happens first). Luck, here, involves being in the right place at the right time. It approximates Nagel’s circumstantial luck. In the geography literature focused on life chances and accidents of birth/residence, it fits closely to ‘geographical luck’ ([Kearns and Reid-Henry 2009](#)) and ‘the place of fortune’ ([Smith 2000](#)).

##### 4.4. The practical sphere

A fourth geographical aspect of luck is found in Martha [Nussbaum’s \(1986\)](#) reading of Greek tragedy and philosophy, which focuses in particular on the Stoics, Plato, and Aristotle. The first two groups sought to luck-proof life; to make life immune to luck-as-chance. The Stoics did this by narrowing their definition of the good life to just what can be controlled. Plato did something similar, working to reduce the area of life over which he had no control (*tuchē*) by applying reason, science, skill, know-how (*technē*). This was Plato’s ‘goodness without fragility’ position. Against Plato (and the Stoics), Nussbaum argues that life cannot be luck-proofed entirely because the good life requires more than ascetic contemplation. It requires other people, who bring instability and risk. This is Nussbaum’s ‘fragility of goodness’ position. It aligns best with Aristotle, for whom the good life must be worked out in the practical sphere; in response to passions and appetites, friends and lovers, new encounters; and with incomplete and imperfect knowledge. So, for Nussbaum (following Aristotle), the good life must be lived in the practical sphere – in the situations of everyday life ([Clarke and Barnett 2023a](#)) – and must respond to the lack of control (i.e. luck) characterising this sphere.

#### 5. Luck and Mass Observation

One archive capturing how people in the UK respond to characteristics of the practical sphere, including luck, is the Mass Observation Archive (MOA). Mass Observation (MO) was founded in 1937 as Mass-Observation (originally with a hyphen). The founders – Tom Harrison, Charles Madge, and Humphrey Jennings – were interested in ‘mass culture’, which they researched using volunteer observers in Bolton (Harrison’s ‘Worktown’ study) and across the UK (Madge’s National Panel).

Relevant to my theme of luck, Harrison and Madge met by chance. Harrison’s poem, ‘Coconut Moon’, was published in *The New Statesman* (2nd January 1937) on the same page as Madge’s letter outlining the need for ‘an anthropology of our own people’. Harrison had already begun his Bolton research by this time, saw the letter while checking publication of his poem, and contacted Madge to discuss future collaborations. Also relevant to my theme, the original MO took a positive view of chance, or at least Madge and Jennings did. Both were influenced by surrealism, used surrealist techniques like montage and juxtaposition to manufacture chance encounters, and hoped that such chance encounters – staged in MO publications – would defamiliarise

the everyday, opening it up to critique (Jennings and Madge 1937; see also Highmore 2002).

If the original MO took a positive view of luck-as-chance, this positive view did not extend to luck-as-superstition. The founders were *for chance* and *against superstition* (a consistent position). One function of MO was to help ‘the masses’ understand current events without recourse to superstition (Madge and Harrison 1939). The founders were worried that people were responding to the abdication crisis of 1936 and the war crisis of 1938 with uncertainty, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and apathy. They were worried that people were turning to rumour, fatalism, and prayer – and, given developments in continental Europe, might become susceptible to fascist propaganda. In this context, MO would provide people with ‘the facts’ not being provided by politicians, the press, and universities. It would also make superstition a focus of mass observation and conscious reflection, which might lessen superstition’s magical power (Highmore 2023).

The original MO ceased operating in the late 1940s. Its papers are archived at the University of Sussex, Brighton. Since being founded in 1975, the MOA has evolved from an archive focused on the original MO to a research organisation with its own active research projects. The Mass Observation Project (MOP) was established in 1981. Inspired by Madge’s National Panel, it sends ‘directives’ – sets of open questions – every four months to hundreds of volunteer writers across the UK. The 12th May project was established in 2010. Inspired by one of the first publications of the original MO (*May the Twelfth* – Jennings and Madge 1937), it collects day-diaries annually on 12th May from people across the UK. Between 2010 and 2019, the 12th May project received only a small number of day-diaries (in the low hundreds) in response to annual calls made via news and social media. Then 12th May 2020 happened and something changed. With many people confined at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with time on their hands and sensing they were living through events of historical significance, the MOA received c5,000 diaries in response to its call.

Who are these 5,000 diarists? Like all contributors to MO, they are a particular group of people by definition. They are volunteers. Beyond this basic starting point, however, we can say that among the diarists who responded on 12th May 2020 can be found a wide range of positions, experiences, and voices. Roughly a third are of working age, with a third of retirement age and a third of school age. All genders, regions, and occupational classifications are covered. To ensure I captured this wide range, and because of the sheer volume of material in the archive, I sampled 10 per cent of the diaries (500 of the 5,000). This allowed me to fill quotas for age, gender, region, and occupation, though one thing I was unable to do was to fill quotas for race or ethnicity, since MO did not start collecting this information – or metadata for religion, sexuality, or (dis)ability – until 2021. The sampling exercise, then, did not produce a set of diarists formally representative of the UK population. We can assume that white people are over-represented, though we cannot be sure, and some of the diaries do appear to be from people of colour. From the metadata collected by MO, we can be sure that certain groups are slightly over-represented (women, teenagers and people in their 50s and 60s, people from South East England, and people with professional occupations) and certain groups are slightly under-represented (men, people in their 20s, people from the West Midlands, and people with elementary occupations).

How should these diaries be analysed? There are various ways of reading MO writing (Clarke and Barnett 2023b). David Pocock, an early director of the MOA and founder of the MOP, was a social anthropologist in the Oxford tradition who read the archive for how people interpret everyday life using their own concepts, models, and theories (Sheridan et al 2000). Dorothy Sheridan, who succeeded Pocock as director of the MOA, viewed the MOP as a life history project (Sheridan 1996) – an archive of biographical writing, from which autobiographical essays might be produced (e.g. Hinton 2010). Researchers have noted the subjective character of writing for the MOP, through which panellists construct and promote their identities (e.g. Nettleton and Uprichard

2011), but also its *intersubjective* or dialogic character (e.g. Pollen 2014). Panellists write to the archive not as respondents, but as *correspondents* engaged in an ongoing conversation with the archivists (Sheridan et al 2000).

My own approach to the archive has been informed by Pocock’s social anthropology – focused on lay concepts, models, and theories – and more recent studies in a similar vein, which I develop elsewhere (Clarke et al 2018). Here, I emphasise two sets of points relevant to the present article. First, the 12th May diaries are different from directive responses submitted to the MOP. They tend to be less directed (beyond a general direction to record the day). Many diarists are not regular panellists. So the diaries tend to be less autobiographical and intersubjective than writing for the MOP. They lend themselves more to reading for cultural resources, such as uses of luck, chance, and fortune – often using these precise terms – to make sense of events. Also, they lend themselves to reading for descriptions of apparent objective luck: chance, unexpected events that were largely beyond the control of diarists (for whom they are now significant) – regardless of whether the language of luck was used to describe such events in the diaries.

Second, the analysis on which the following sections are based involved a series of steps. 500 of the 5,000 diaries were sampled (as discussed previously). The sample was read initially for what people wrote about, how they wrote about it, the cultural resources they used, and how they used them. A preliminary set of codes was identified from this initial reading – including ‘luck’, which appeared in many of the diaries. This preliminary set of codes was then checked for empirical support, primarily through a second reading of the sampled material – focused on uses of ‘luck’ and its synonyms (‘chance’ and ‘fortune’), but also descriptions of events and outcomes that could be categorised as lucky/unlucky according to the relevant academic literature (regardless of the language used). Uses and descriptions were not counted because the relatively unstructured character of MO materials does not facilitate studies of proportion or prevalence by social group (Pollen 2014). I return to this limitation and potential future research tasks in Section 8. In the next two sections, I focus on what MO diaries *are* good for (in the present context): identifying events and outcomes that appear lucky/unlucky according to the working definition and geographical aspects of luck detailed previously (Section 6); and identifying uses of luck as a cultural resource, especially for making sense of privilege and suffering (Section 7).

## 6. Luck and the Covid-19 pandemic

This section and the next provide a brief demonstration of how luck appears in the diaries, with a particular focus on some geographical aspects of luck, using a few illustrative quotations. These quotes are labelled using MO’s code for each diarist, with metadata provided in the text. They are necessarily selective due to space constraints. Other quotes of relevance, and other themes, can be found in *Everyday Life in the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Clarke 2024). The full set of 5,000 diaries can be viewed at the MOA.

Regarding the geographical aspects of luck identified in Section 4, the rest of the present section focuses on some of these aspects, but not all. This is because the content of Section 4 was generated from the literatures reviewed in Sections 2 and 3, whereas the content of the present section was also generated from – and constrained by – the empirical material. The diaries contain many illustrations of ‘the Cournot effect’ (part of ‘the geometry of luck’), ‘right place, right time’, and ‘the practical sphere’ (as it relates to luck). They contain few illustrations of ‘the forked path’ (part of the geometry of luck) and ‘lucky places’, which is perhaps not surprising if we consider that people were largely confined at home on 12th May 2020 and so were not moving through such archetypal lucky places as train stations or airports (with their ‘sliding doors’ moments).

### 6.1. The geometry of luck (and the Cournot effect)

Many diarists wrote about (un)lucky timing. The virus arrived in the UK in early 2020. It was a matter of luck that some people were more impacted by this date of arrival than others, depending on how the trajectory of the pandemic intersected with their own personal trajectories. There was the 18-year-old from London (37) who was ‘ramping up for the most intense period’ of exams and felt ‘like the rug has been pulled from beneath my feet’. Similarly, there was the son of a community health worker in her 50s from South West England (3569) who, she reports, ‘was just about to launch himself into the world’ before having ‘his life turned upside down’ by cancelled exams and a cancelled driving test. Then there was the student in her 20s from East of England (1991) who faced the dilemma of whether to move in with her relatively new boyfriend at the start of lockdown. She decided not to do so – ‘We only started seeing each other a few months before. Felt a bit soon’ – with consequences for her pandemic experience.

There were diarists whose career trajectories intersected with the pandemic’s trajectory in significant ways beyond their control. The husband of an unemployed journalist in her 50s from the East Midlands (2723) was made redundant at the beginning of 2020 – ‘the worst timing possible. And my job ended in January’. They both found themselves ‘shut out of the world of work’ during the first half of 2020. Still, in one respect, they were more fortunate than a garden designer in her 50s from South West England (3562). She made the decision to go self-employed at the beginning of 2020. Then the pandemic hit. She was no longer employed, so did not qualify for the Government’s Job Retention Scheme, but she had not been self-employed for long enough to qualify for the Government’s Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. She lamented: ‘I’ve fallen through the cracks’.

Then there were the unlucky diarists for whom the virus had arrived at a crucial moment for their wider health. Perhaps they had just started seeing a counsellor, which was helping with their depression, and which now had to stop (2205, a retired teacher in his 70s from North West England, who wrote his diary while ‘flooding with tears’). Or perhaps they had been due an operation, which had now been postponed indefinitely. This was the case for a retired teacher in her 60s from Scotland (2788), whose hip replacement surgery had been due the very next day after lockdown began, and who spent the first half of 2020 in pain, unable to drive or walk unaided, feeling vulnerable.

In the previous three paragraphs, we see a particular geometry of luck: the Cournot effect. One line representing the trajectory of the virus (plus associated government regulations and support) intersects with another line representing different life trajectories. Where the first line intersects with the second line – at the point when a student is meant to be taking exams, when a worker has just been made redundant or become self-employed, when a young couple have just begun a relationship, when the wait for a medical operation is finally meant to be over – is a matter of chance. This point of intersection, which Ermakoff terms ‘happenstance’, could impact significantly the pandemic experience, heightening disappointment, financial hardship, loneliness, or physical pain. Of course, the level of impact would be mediated by individual and group resources; the uneven capacity of individuals and groups to respond when hit by good or bad luck. Furthermore, the point of intersection describes a geometry, but each line or trajectory also reflects a particular geographical pattern – of labour demand, for example, or healthcare provision. Distributions of such opportunities and infrastructures, and accidents of location within such uneven distributions, bring us again to ‘right place, right time’.

### 6.2. Right place, right time

The pandemic arrived at a particular moment in people’s lives. It also found people in particular places – and reshaped those places for people in ways they could not have predicted a few months earlier. The pandemic found people in particular sectors of the economy, some of

which – aviation (1867), hospitality (1133), entertainment (2589) – were more impacted than others. It found people in particular jobs within those sectors, some of which – training (1035) or laboratory work (2037) – were more impacted than others. The pandemic also found people in particular localities. With new demands for social distancing and fresh (uninfected) air, people felt lucky to live in the countryside (1137) or at the coast (1342).

Even something so mundane as purchasing the daily newspaper took on heightened significance during lockdown. A retired IT specialist in his 70s from Scotland (3524) could stay home, limiting his risk of catching the virus, because the local shop would deliver (‘and unbelievably efficient they are too’). By contrast, a retired engineer in his 70s from London (3248) could not stay home if he wanted a newspaper. He justified his morning visit to the local shop by writing: ‘I am not supposed to go out until June but our delivery service was too unreliable’. Here, we have two men in their 70s, both of whom wished to manage their risk of infection while maintaining their habit of reading the (physical) newspaper. By chance, one found this easier to achieve than the other. And the potential consequences – of 3248 catching the virus while out shopping – were significant.

In the previous two paragraphs, we see illustrated ‘right place, right time’ (or ‘wrong place, wrong time’). When the pandemic arrived in the UK, and when associated regulations took force, it mattered where one happened to be located – in which sector of the economy, in which role within that sector, in which locality (with what kind of amenities), in which neighbourhood (with what kind of services). Some people found themselves luckily positioned in the distribution, which was geographically uneven, and which was a redistribution shaped by the pandemic, during which the value of certain sectors, roles, amenities, and services was raised (or lowered) – if only temporarily. Their new circumstances, largely unforeseen and beyond their control, made these people beneficiaries of circumstantial luck (or victims of circumstantial bad luck). These new risk and resource contexts, largely unearned, produced new (dis)advantages, inequalities, and injustices.

### 6.3. The practical sphere

The discussion so far has touched on the idea that pandemic life could perhaps be luck-proofed. Indeed, luck-proofing – the ‘taming of chance’ (Hacking 1990) by calculating probabilities and managing risk – was encouraged by the UK Government. The pandemic was to be managed by pharmaceutical measures (anti-viral medicines and vaccines – when they became available) and non-pharmaceutical measures (NPMs – social distancing, hand-washing, wearing of face coverings).

Many diarists took such luck-proofing seriously. They stayed home, got deliveries where possible, went out shopping infrequently, wore facemasks and gloves when they did so, disinfected parcels or purchases they brought home, changed their work clothes and showered on arriving home. A scientist in her 30s from the East Midlands (2069) wrote about pandemic life with her ‘highly vulnerable’ partner. They stayed ‘in full isolation’ and avoided going out ‘even for daily exercise’. As she put it: ‘We can’t risk it [...] He really wouldn’t stand a chance against [the virus] with his health condition’. A consultant engineer in his 50s from Scotland (1375) reported a discussion with his wife about shopping. She would take on that particular responsibility because he was ‘marginally more vulnerable to the virus (male with asthma)’. He wrote: ‘Minimising the virus spread has become an exercise in probabilities for us’.

If all this recalls Plato’s ‘goodness without fragility’ (a luck-proofed good life), then we know to expect Nussbaum’s ‘fragility of goodness’. There is plenty of evidence in the diaries that pandemic life could not be luck-proofed entirely – could not be made immune to chance or reduced to what might be controlled – because it had to be lived in the practical sphere, where the situations of everyday life brought various demands and risks. A retired town planner in his 70s from North East England (4479) reported the demands of his body and mind: ‘I acknowledge that

my bronchiectasis places me at high risk of serious illness if I contract the virus, but I cannot stay locked in the house without risking my physical health and mental wellbeing. I choose to walk briskly along in my quiet neighbourhood for an hour most days'. A retired teacher in her 70s from the East Midlands (1794) reported the demands of a friend whose house she visited with her husband to drop off a birthday card: 'He asked us to come in and witness his and his wife's Power of Attorney forms. We shouldn't really have done this but we are all quite well and have been self-isolating for weeks. We were very careful'. One more example: a retired engineer in his 60s from North West England (3567) reported the demands of his neighbour, or at least the demands of being a good neighbour, even in pandemic times: 'I see a neighbour walking towards me with his daughter [...] This neighbour has only just come out of isolation, having contracted Covid-19 about three weeks ago. All my instincts are to stay as far away from him as possible, but I didn't feel that I could just walk away – it would have hardly been a neighbourly thing to do'. For these diarists, living a good pandemic life involved confronting the inevitability of luck-as-chance (in the practical sphere), instead of trying to manage risk down to zero (by retreating from the practical sphere).

## 7. Luck and politics

One theme in the diaries was the good life, lived in the face of luck-as-chance. Another theme in the diaries was comparison. Diarists positioned themselves in relation to others, acknowledging: 'how fortunate we are' while 'our fortune is not shared by everyone' (119); that 'I'm lucky' while 'Many aren't so lucky' (139); that 'We are among the lucky few' while 'this is not the case for millions of others' (522). Here, [Tiegen's \(1997\)](#) research on contrastive luck is helpful. In experiments with psychology students, he found that luck talk is often accompanied by downward counterfactuals. People feel lucky and grateful if doing better than others. They feel unlucky and envious if doing worse than others.

In [Tiegen's](#) experiments, luck was associated with gratitude or envy. In the MO diaries, luck sometimes appears with privilege. Diarists wrote of 'luck and privilege' (591). One could 'feel lucky', but also be 'aware of the privileges' (250). This awareness covered how pandemic experiences and outcomes varied by social group. Diarists demonstrated awareness of 'relative privilege' ([Smith 2020](#)). They also recognised 'absolute suffering' (ibid). Certain social groups were suffering more on average, but individuals could suffer in absolute terms, regardless of their social group. Put differently, systemic bad luck did not crowd out non-systemic bad luck. This was reflected in the structure of many diaries, where diarists wrote: *I feel lucky, but...* 'I know that with a healthy family, employment, and a roof over my head, I am a very fortunate person', wrote an online shopper in her 20s from South East England (1691), 'yet the waves of panic and sadness of my normal life that I am not living still creep in'. 'There are far worse problems to have' than a cancelled wedding, wrote a lawyer in her 30s from South West England (3761), 'but I also allow myself to have a little cry or feel a fraction of self-pity at times, just because I think maybe it's ok to grieve over the carefully laid plans that have been unravelled'. 'I know we are lucky' and 'there are people so much worse off than us', wrote a psychologist in her 40s from Yorkshire and Humber (1137), 'But it doesn't feel easy'.

These diarists appear to appreciate that luck is unevenly distributed through society, with members of some groups more likely to catch lucky breaks than others, and more able to capitalise on lucky breaks than others. At the same time, they appear to appreciate that anyone could suffer bad luck, regardless of their social group. Anyone could catch the virus and become seriously ill, even while those around them, from their own social group, remained healthy. This was the case for diarist 3150, who describes her battle with Long Covid, which marked her out from her family and friendship group (as 'unlucky'). Furthermore, this appreciation that anyone could suffer bad luck was accompanied by a widespread belief that bad luck should be compensated. A holiday cancelled due to lockdown should be refunded (1979). A

cancelled trip to see family should be covered by travel insurance (2621). Tickets for a cancelled show should be compensated with credit for next year (3367). There is evidence here of what philosophers call 'anti-moral-luck intuition' (e.g. [Swenson 2002](#)): a feeling that people should not be blamed or incur penalties for outcomes resulting from bad luck. The corollary of this is that people should not be praised or reap rewards for outcomes resulting from good luck.

The idea that bad luck should be compensated is the subject of much discussion in political philosophy. Following [Ronald Dworkin \(2000\)](#), luck egalitarians distinguish between inequalities resulting from 'brute luck' (outcomes over which prudent individuals had no control/responsibility e.g. a rare illness, unrelated to lifestyle) and 'option luck' (outcomes over which imprudent individuals had some degree of control/responsibility e.g. a gamble). For luck egalitarians, the former inequalities should be eliminated – usually by redistribution – while the latter should not be eliminated. However, this distinction is controversial (see [Turner 2019](#)). It allows inequalities, including extreme poverty, to persist (if generated by option luck). And it subjects people to invasive inquiries and stigmatising judgements regarding their personal choices and responsibilities, which impact their dignity.

There is overlap between this controversy and recent discussion of meritocracy. Inspired by [Michael Young's \(1958\) \*The Rise of the Meritocracy\*](#), [Michael Sandel \(2020\)](#) argues that meritocracy is not justified. People who reach the top do so partly due to privilege (e.g. good schools) and partly due to luck (e.g. a geohistorical context that values their particular talents). Furthermore, Sandel argues that meritocracy produces harms. It justifies inequality, allows economic inequality to continue, and encourages 'moral inequality' – the sense among people at the top that they deserve to be at the top, and the sense among people at the bottom that they deserve to be at the bottom (a heavy burden for this latter group).

These debates in political philosophy suggest that luck should not be quickly dismissed for its political risks. To be clear, these risks are numerous. Luck is associated with superstition, when politics is meant to focus on worldly solutions to worldly problems. It is associated with chance, unexpectedness, unpredictability, when politics is meant to act on expectations and predictions. Luck talk can downplay agency, when politics is meant to locate responsibility. It can also downplay structure, when politics is meant to recognise and address patterns of privilege and oppression. For [Lukes and Haglund \(2005\)](#), luck discourse is depoliticising. It misrecognises power, which influences even unintended acts (via habitus) and circumstances (via political choices that accumulate through history). Luck is less something that explains and more something to be explained (ibid).

Luck brings political risks, then, but I would not go so far as [Lukes and Haglund](#). Examples can be found in [Section 6](#) and the studies reviewed in [Sections 2 and 3](#) (e.g. [Burridge and Gill 2017](#), [Kearns and Reid-Henry 2009](#)) where objective luck really does help to explain outcomes and experiences, at least to some extent. This is the case whether luck interacts with agency and structure (as a third part of causation), or helps to constitute agency and structure (as in constitutive or systemic luck). Moreover, for the purposes of my argument in the present section, luck is a *folk concept* – a cultural resource used by people to make sense of their uncertain lives. And cultural resources are always potential political resources; potential ways of connecting people's private troubles to public issues ([Wright Mills 1959](#)). In this way, rather than being depoliticising, luck is (potentially) politicising. It provides a potential basis for popular critique of meritocracy and popular justification for redistribution.

Such a basis is needed in countries like the UK. Here, the centre left is frequently accused of lacking political vision. The Labour Party talks of merit (e.g. 'hard-working families'), but not luck. Indeed, 'luck' has only appeared once in a Labour Party general election manifesto since the Second World War (very briefly in 1959). Yet luck is central to perhaps the most important articulation of left-liberal political philosophy available: [John Rawls' \(1971\) \*A Theory of Justice\*](#). Luck helps to define

Rawls' 'original position': 'Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, *nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, his strength, and the like*' (p12, emphasis added). Luck also helps to define Rawls' 'veil of ignorance': 'The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles *by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances*' (p12, emphasis added). For Rawls, social injustice was explained by luck (fortune, chance, contingency – among other things), and social justice would be achieved by policies based on principles accounting for luck. Rawls would leave others to develop these policies and their specific justifications. Examples include policies redistributing away from those benefiting from good luck – e.g. windfall taxes, capital gains tax, inheritance tax – and policies redistributing towards those suffering from bad luck e.g. welfare provision without postcode lotteries (Chandler 2023). Also, Rawls appreciated what – I've been arguing – gives a concept (luck) its political potential. To do political work, concepts must be founded in philosophy (Rawls' task in *A Theory of Justice*), but also in 'public political culture' and 'common sense' (Rawls 2001: 5).

## 8. Conclusion

Luck matters politically. MO diarists used luck to make sense of their position in society. Many appreciated that luck is unevenly distributed through society, but also that anyone can suffer bad luck, which they expected to be compensated. A cultural resource, luck is also – potentially – a political resource. It has the potential to bring people together as publics around shared problems (inequality) and solutions (redistribution); to be politicising. It could provide a basis for popular critique of meritocracy and popular justification for welfare.

That is one reason for geographers to pay more attention to luck, but there are others. As part of a theory of causation – whether alongside or constitutive of structure and agency – luck helps to explain spatial patterns. As a widely shared cultural resource, luck is a prominent, prevalent means by which many people understand their situation, relations, agency, and responsibilities.

To encourage and facilitate such attention, four main contributions have been made in this article. First, a set of definitions has been provided (minimalist, maximalist, and working), alongside a set of concepts (objective and subjective luck). Second, some geographical aspects of luck have been identified: the geometry of luck; lucky places; right place, right time; and the practical sphere. Together, these constitute the beginnings of a geographical approach to luck. Third, I've demonstrated how such geographies of luck might be accessed via diaries and similar sources. These can be read for accounts of apparently objective luck (chance, unexpected events that are significant for the diarist and were largely beyond their control) and apparently subjective uses of luck as a cultural resource (to make sense of events, outcomes, and relations).

Fourth, I've demonstrated how geographies of luck impacted the pandemic experience. It mattered where the trajectory of the pandemic intersected with the trajectories of individuals; a point of intersection that was partly a matter of chance. It mattered where people were resident when the pandemic arrived. While such locations are never simply a matter of chance (Slater 2013), the way location in the distribution of risks and resources changed as the pandemic redistributed such items was largely unexpected and beyond the control of many people. Furthermore, it mattered that everyday life in the pandemic took place in the practical sphere where luck was viewed as both something to be proofed against (using NPMs) and something inevitable (because the practical sphere carries demands and responsibilities to selves and others, plus associated risks).

If these are the article's contributions, its limitations leave some future research needs. There is a need for more empirical demonstration and development of the geographical aspects of luck identified in Section 4. This is especially the case for lucky places – the non-places of

modernity like airports and train stations, associated with chance encounters and forked paths – which are largely absent from diaries kept during lockdown. There is also a need to consider additional geographical aspects of luck. The present article provides the beginnings of a geographical approach to luck, as opposed to a fully developed geographical theory of luck. What else might such a theory cover? One suggestion is the context in which luck gets mobilised as a cultural resource. When and where do people select luck talk over other options? There is also the question of who talks about luck. Is luck used as a cultural resource more by certain social groups? Such questions of prevalence and proportion require more structured datasets than MO's relatively unstructured materials. Finally, the task of verifying luck stories also requires alternative data and methods. People may perceive randomness in their lives. Geographers may continue to study perceived randomness for hidden patterns and background ordering processes.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Nick Clarke:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Data availability

12th May 2020 diaries are available to view at the Mass Observation Archive or via <https://massobs.org.uk/>

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