

And After the Virus? The Perils Ahead

Resistance in the Year of the Plague

CrimethInc.

April 10, 2020

Contents

The Worst-Case Scenario	3
Forcing the Issue	5
Financial Crisis	5
Health Care	5
Housing	6
Social Isolation	6
Ecology	6
Totalitarianism	6
Three Programs	7
The Adherents of Capitalism—Which Is to Say, Death	7
The Apostles of Technocracy—Which Is to Say, Survival	8
The Partisans of Freedom—Which Is to Say, Life	10

How will our society emerge from the COVID-19 crisis? Does the pandemic show that we need more centralized state power, more surveillance and control? What are the threats ranged against us—and how can we prepare to confront them?

Several days ago, the number of coronavirus deaths in New York City surpassed the death toll of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Whenever pundits and politicians invoke 9/11, you know they're trying to set the stage for some shock and awe.

The September 11 attacks served to justify the Patriot Act, extraordinary rendition and torture, the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq; these paved the way for a host of other catastrophes, including the rise of the Islamic State. While 2977 civilians were killed on September 11, the ensuing “War on Terror” killed at least one hundred times that many civilians.

If the September 11 comparison shows anything, it is that the state response to the pandemic will be far more destructive than the virus itself. Let's review what the dangers are and the logic of those who aim to drive the state response in order to prepare for the next stage of the crisis before it hits. It is not inevitable that what comes out of this will be tyranny; on the contrary, it might be upheaval.

As we asserted long ago, in another century, *there is a difference between life and survival*. Confronting the pandemic and the totalitarian power grabs accompanying it, let's concern ourselves not only with the question of how we will survive, but also of how we wish to live.

“Plague regulations also cast a long shadow over political history. They marked a vast extension of state power into spheres of human life that had never before been subject to political authority... They justified control over the economy and the movement of people; they authorized surveillance and forcible detention; and they sanctioned the invasion of homes and the extinction of civil liberties. With the unanswerable argument of a public health emergency, this extension of power was welcomed by the church and by powerful political and medical voices. The campaign against plague marked a moment in the emergence of absolutism, and more generally, it promoted an accretion of the power and legitimation of the modern state.”

—*Epidemics and Society from the Black Death to the Present*, Frank M. Snowden

The Worst-Case Scenario

Owing to neoliberal globalization and automation, an increasing proportion of the global population is simply inessential to industrial production and distribution. Consequently, workers have flooded the service sector, working longer and longer hours to survive. Rather than renegotiating the peace treaties between capitalists and workers that sustained capitalism through the 20th century,¹ governments have come to rely on ever more repressive policing, depending on technological innovations to keep restless populations under control. Nonetheless—or else for

¹ These “peace treaties” included authoritarian state socialism in the Eastern Bloc, a combination of the Fordist compromise and social-democratic safety nets in the United States and Europe, and the promise of economic development in the Global South.

this very reason—unrest came to a boil in 2019 with uprisings in Hong Kong, Chile, Catalunya, Lebanon, Sudan, Haiti, and dozens of other countries, with more anticipated in 2020... until the virus reshuffled the cards.

This is not an auspicious situation in which to face a pandemic. When the authorities regard an increasing proportion of the population as an expendable nuisance contained by ever-escalating violence, they have little incentive to keep us alive. Some, like Trump, want to establish gated communities of class, nationality, and ethnicity and leave everyone outside them at the mercy of these newly heightened risks. Others hope to broker a new deal between rulers and ruled by providing a modicum of safety to all in return for unprecedented forms of surveillance and control. Below, we'll address both of these proposals for how to stabilize state power for the 21st century.

If many radicals seem strangely sanguine about the prospects for social change, it is only because our current conditions have become so obviously untenable—not because there is anything particularly promising about them.

In many ways, the worst-case scenario is already here. Police robots are already patrolling the streets of North Africa as drones target villagers in Italy. Viktor Orbán has become the de facto dictator of Hungary in the heart of supposedly democratic Europe. The Islamophobic government of India has locked down 1.3 billion people with a single order. In East Java, stay-at-home orders were used to disperse residents who had been defending their region against a destructive gold mine—but not to stop mining operations. From China to Peru, the pandemic has offered a pretext for governments to repress journalists reporting on their poor handling of it. Trump has taken advantage of the situation to intensify military operations throughout the Western Hemisphere—not to distract from his handling of the virus, as some foolishly assume, but because the virus affords him an irresistible opportunity to advance his agenda.

In the US, risk of exposure is explicitly distributed according to class. Delivery drivers dispatch groceries to computer programmers who never leave their houses; nurses assigned to treat patients with COVID-19 symptoms bring iPhones with them so that doctors can FaceTime the patients without being exposed to danger themselves.

Confined to our houses, we are a captive consumer base in a company town run by Amazon, dependent on telecommunications companies that could cut us off from each other with the flip of a switch. The authorities are mulling the possibility of tracking and controlling all our movements with passports based on health data. If such a program gets off the ground, they could expand it to control freedom of movement according to legal status as well, transforming our entire society into a prison.

Even in nations that have “flattened the curve,” emergency measures including social distancing and prohibitions on large gatherings might well last another year while a vaccine is in development.

“Until there’s a vaccine, the US either needs economically ruinous levels of social distancing, a digital surveillance state of shocking size and scope, or a mass testing apparatus of even more shocking size and intrusiveness.”

—“I’ve read the plans to reopen the economy. They’re scary.” Ezra Klein

We need to talk frankly about what all this means for social movements. Alongside the virus, we are experiencing the most brutal assault on our freedom in at least a generation. Many of

our tools for collective self-defense depend on concentrating in large numbers, which the virus renders extremely dangerous. Even if a new revolt on the model of the uprising in Chile breaks out later this year, public health officials will deem it an epidemiological risk and call for the imposition of a new lockdown, provoking a split within our ranks between those invested in resistance at any price and those who consider it so irresponsible to risk spreading the virus that they would prefer total capitulation.

This presents serious conundrums. Some are experimenting with automobile-based demonstrations, but we need to develop a much wider range of options.

While they take advantage of the pandemic to consolidate power and advance their agendas, authoritarians of all stripes are also using this opportunity to legitimize invasive state intervention as the only effective means of dealing with a crisis like COVID-19. We have to debunk their arguments, presenting more convincing and inspiring models for how to respond to this crisis. Even with all the technology and subservience at its disposal, the state cannot reign without a certain amount of perceived legitimacy, without a certain amount of public consent. In shifting definitively from the carrot to the stick, our rulers are making a dangerous gamble.

Forcing the Issue

The pandemic pushes several tensions that were already destabilizing our society to the breaking point. Let's look at them alongside each other:

Financial Crisis

Many have been anticipating a financial crisis for years. Debt has served to keep the economy running—and to indenture people to it—for decades now. If the obligations of debt can be suspended or canceled by legislative fiat, if capitalism only functions because governments keep bailing out banks and corporations at everyone else's expense, then in theory, this should call the entire system into question. The ways that the capitalist economy does not meet most people's needs—for safety, for material necessities, for joy and togetherness and meaning—are cast in stark relief today. But if social distancing requirements and authoritarian clampdowns prevent anyone from demonstrating a feasible alternative, many people may respond by pining for an imagined past of normalcy.

Health Care

In the United States, access to health care has long been an expensive privilege; in many states, Obamacare made no difference whatsoever in the lives of the poorest. Now it's clear how the health of the poor can impact the entire population.

There are two possible responses to this. One is for our society to direct resources to meeting the health care needs of the entire population—on our terms, according to our priorities. The other is for the elite class to treat the health risks posed by the general population as a danger to be managed for the protection of the privileged.

Housing

Worldwide, property speculation and gentrification had already displaced countless millions and made housing nearly unaffordable for the majority; no wonder nearly a third of apartment renters in the US didn't pay rent for April. Those who could only afford to live in urban shoeboxes are now confined to them like cells; others are homeless in the face of "stay at home" orders. Domestic violence and mental health issues have reached epidemic proportions alongside the virus.

All this forces the issue: what is a home? Is it real estate to be speculated upon, a space of isolation, a tiny holdover of patriarchal feudalism ("a man's home is his castle")? Or is it something else—the feeling of security created by collective solidarity, something that could bind individuals and communities together rather than separating us?

Social Isolation

The pandemic has confined literally billions of people to their homes—those who have homes at all—but in many cases this has had an unexpected effect, opening up the home as a space of sociality, creating new forms of intimacy and strengthening networks. Yet this sociality is almost entirely virtual—and it depends on a very small number of telecommunications companies and platforms.

Right now, social distancing is exerting so much pressure on people that many of us feel a desperate urgency to gather in large numbers, to hug our friends and rub elbows with strangers. The value of public spaces and sociality has never been clearer. If this pressure continues building, it could have disruptive or liberating effects.

But if social distancing continues in varied forms for a year or more, will people get used to it, coming to regard crowds fearfully, developing agoraphobia and new social anxieties? Will we have become so habituated to conducting our relationships in virtual mediums that afterwards we continue doing so even when we could be together in person? Will the power that the algorithms of corporations like Facebook have to shape online dialogue influence what it is possible to imagine even more than it has already?

Ecology

The reduction in ecological damage during the confinement period in China has been news around the world. Until now, everyone regarded the ongoing environmental catastrophe as something beyond our control. Now it is clear that—if we choose to—we could put a stop to it. Neither democracy nor authoritarian governments have been able to prioritize this. But if a virus could halt ecological destruction, so could an ungovernable social movement.

Totalitarianism

Border clampdowns, state surveillance, authoritarianism, and the violence of the police state were already intensifying rapidly before this. The authorities are playing a risky game of double or nothing. Right now, they have a powerful justification for grabbing power—but if they overreach, all the pressure that has built up could explode.

The release of prisoners from jails and prisons underscores that *they didn't have to be in there in the first place*. Police have been presenting themselves as stopping the virus from spreading, but according to that logic, it would be safer to get *them* off the street, as well. It is the height of foolishness to imagine that the virus is an adversary that can be fought by military means in a “war,” to use Trump’s rhetoric; like the hydra, every blow that the armed forces aim at it will only make it stronger.

The question remains whether that will be true of *our* resistance as well.

Three Programs

In analyzing the available frameworks for how to respond to the pandemic, we can simplify the options on offer into three competing camps: the adherents of death, the apostles of survival, and the partisans of life.

The Adherents of Capitalism—Which Is to Say, Death

It has never been more obvious that “life” for the market represents death for us. Donald Trump and the other murder barons who would hasten us back to work for the sake of their precious bar graphs have made this clear enough. Capitalism has always been a cult of death. We sell away the unrepeatable moments of our lives for wages—we reduce forests to sawdust, clean air to smog, water to poison—as profit-driven market competition makes the rich richer and immiserates the rest of us. At this rate, we will soon join the countless species we have already driven into extinction.

This is not just a question of whether Trump will call for us to return to work before the scientists give him permission; right now, everywhere that workers are being compelled to risk exposure to COVID-19 in order to pay rent, the market is already being prioritized over human life, just as it was before the pandemic.

While downplaying the risks of returning to work, nationalists like Trump and Matteo Salvini have used the pandemic to advance their program of shutting borders, insinuating that Chinese, African, and Latin American migrants are responsible for its spread. In fact, it appears that the virus arrived in New York from Europe; the chief vectors likely include the global business class, politicians, and police officers, one of the only groups permitted to congregate in groups and circulate freely without proper protective gear.

Whether or not this is how the coronavirus spread, these are the vectors of *the virus of control*—which is what makes the coronavirus so dangerous. If not for all the police, cameras, courts, and prisons, we would long ago have abolished the political and economic system that creates such great disparities in wealth and power. If not for those disparities, we would not be forced to keep showing up to work even when doing so means exposing ourselves to a statistically significant risk of getting killed in addition to all the usual humiliations of wage labor. The uneven distribution of resources and power increases the risks that the poor face, but it also increases the likelihood that poor people, homeless people, and workers will be compelled to do things that continue to spread the virus.

While it was ironic that the “libertarian” Rand Paul was the first Senator to test positive for coronavirus—and many hoped that the virus would punish him for his hubris once and for all—his infection, like the infection of so many New York City Police officers, is a perfect metaphor

for the risk they pose us. There was never any danger that Rand Paul or Boris Johnson would be forced to go without a ventilator. Their carelessness, violence, and profiteering are the vectors through which the virus exposes the rest of us to mortal peril. COVID-19 is not an avenging angel that will carry out the vengeance of the people.

It's easy to be critical when bourgeois taxpayers who thoughtlessly paid for guided missiles to slaughter people in Iraq and Afghanistan are panicking about the coronavirus. But let's not be cavalier about death. Any dismissiveness we express about the pandemic will ultimately serve employers who aim to play down the risks for workers and politicians who would prefer to let us die.²

Yes, heart disease and cancer will kill more people than coronavirus this year; so may complications from AIDS. Few have spared a thought lately for the millions killed or displaced by global conflicts, though refugees will be among those hit hardest by the virus. Most people have grown inured to the costs of our way of life, including the ongoing murder-suicide of the entire biosphere by industrially-produced climate change; in this context, the widespread focus on the coronavirus comes across as myopic. But rather than habituating ourselves to yet another threat, we should extend the concern with which many regard the coronavirus outbreak to all the other tragedies to which everyone has become so accustomed.

Every single death caused by our society's unequal distribution of resources is an immeasurable tragedy. We should respond to each the way that the residents of Ferguson, Missouri responded to the murder of Michael Brown. While capitalists will surely attempt to exploit the distinctions between "essential workers," the newly unemployed, and those who were already precarious or excluded to play us all against each other, we have to create ties of meaningful solidarity between those endangered by their jobs and those endangered by joblessness, between those who can't pay rent and those who are struggling to pay their mortgages and those who were homeless long before this. **Every one of us is essential.**

The Apostles of Technocracy—Which Is to Say, Survival

"While America may be slow to act at first, once it is up to speed, it can probably match the capabilities of most authoritarian governments, including China's."

—The Thing That Determines a Country's Resistance to the Coronavirus, Francis Fukuyama

Demagogues like Trump have to compete with centrists like the Democratic Party who aim to preserve the same hierarchical structures, but propose to operate them more wisely and efficiently. From the *New York Times* to Western admirers of the Chinese Communist Party, many pundits have sought to distinguish themselves from Trump's ignorant and careless response to the virus by calling for more stringent measures. They are the most passionate advocates of the invasive surveillance measures described above. In return, they offer those Trump would consign to death a better chance of survival.

² In *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti suggests that one of the fundamental drives motivating human beings is the desire to outlive their peers. At first glance, this is a strange proposition; yet in the United States, where social relations have always been based in cutthroat competition, people often see others' misfortune as a net gain for themselves. This is a way to understand some of the cheap bravado with which young people have regarded the prospect of a pandemic that especially impacts the old and infirm.

Indeed, doesn't this pandemic underscore that we need more centralization, more surveillance, "stronger" government?

In fact, every form of government—from China and Iran to the United States—has concealed information about the pandemic and delayed responding to it in ways that intensified the risk for everyone. In Iran, the justification was to keep the population calm ahead of an election; in the United States, it was to keep the stock market going as long as possible. The problem is not that the authorities did not have *enough* control; the problem is the centralization of power itself. Whenever power is concentrated in the hands of a few, whether they be a military junta, party functionaries, or elected officials, they will inevitably prioritize their own interests over those of others. Every aspiring ruling party tells us that *their* governance would be better than the others, or that they could do more good with more power, but we should know better than to trust such promises.

Francis Fukuyama has argued that whether people trust their rulers is the most decisive factor determining the effectiveness of government responses to the pandemic:

“What matters in the end is not regime type, but whether citizens trust their leaders, and whether those leaders preside over a competent and effective state.”

This misses the mark in an obvious and disingenuous way: what happens when there is widespread trust in a “competent and effective” government that *doesn't* do what is in the best interests of its population?

To anarchists, the answer to this problem is clear enough. The only thing that can keep us safe is to establish widespread horizontal means for transmitting information whether the authorities wish for us to or not—so as to get around the state censorship that delayed public awareness of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, for example—and to be capable of implementing our own autonomous, participatory measures for survival, mutual aid, and collective self-defense. If we depend on existing governments to solve all our problems, we will be limited to endorsing their dangerous and self-serving policies while pinning our hopes on unsatisfactory efforts to achieve change via electoral means, like the Bernie Sanders campaign.

The alternative to embracing technocratic top-down solutions is not to celebrate individual freedom on an isolated basis. Rather, it is to invest our energy in becoming more capable of sharing information and coordinating activity internationally, as anarchists have always advocated. *Coordination* and *centralization* are two different things.

As others have argued, the vast majority of the credit for the measures that have delayed the spread of COVID-19 should go to ordinary people who have voluntarily engaged in social distancing and other responsible practices, not to governments. Voluntary, self-organized activity driven by ethics rather than coercion is always going to deliver the best results. If resources and knowledge are distributed widely and evenly enough, people are much more capable of assessing, prioritizing, and addressing the risks they face and pose to others than any centralized decision-making body could be.

In short, the only way to ensure that the political systems in place will actually meet our needs is to be capable of easily overhauling or toppling them when they fail us. More centralized control will only make this more difficult.

This brings us to a related question that will be especially important in the years following the end of the pandemic. Wouldn't it be worth giving up our individual freedoms if we could obtain a

little more security and safety in return? We will likely see demagogues from the center offering us this devil's bargain.

Without the freedom to organize and defend ourselves on our own terms, outside and against the ruling order, we won't be able to defend any gains we make within it. Even if our only concern were to secure our survival in the barest material terms, giving up even an inch of freedom would never help us to achieve that goal.

The open secret about centrists and technocrats is that they do not offer us a real alternative to the autocrats. Their programs always serve to strengthen the state apparatus that the autocrats then employ against us. Trump inherited all the power that Obama concentrated in the executive office. In the end, brutal autocracy or efficient technocracy is a false choice.

Let's conclude with a word about expertise in the sciences. Thus far, medical scientists are perhaps the one group of authorities that has come through this disaster untarnished. But the medical industry itself has never functioned in the best interests of all humanity. Ideally, the development of scientific knowledge should be a collective endeavor involving the entire human race, not a domain in which accredited experts dictate Truth to everyone else. Capitalism and institutionalized systems of authority have long interfered with the participatory development of knowledge, gatekeeping access to the process by means of intellectual property rights, institutional monopolies on information, and determining who gains access to funding. The profit motive that the market imposes on researchers corrupts their priorities and interferes in the process itself—for example, medical study employees who are renting themselves as lab rats to pay their rent have no more incentive to answer questions honestly than medical testing corporations seeking to make a profit.

This pandemic has illustrated the value of collaborative international approaches over market-driven models; practically everyone is hoping that scientists will cooperate across institutional and national borders to produce a vaccine. As in every aspect of our lives, we need more autonomy, more communication and horizontal coordination, not more hierarchy. The existing medical establishment is no more fit to govern us than the prevailing political institutions.

The Partisans of Freedom—Which Is to Say, Life

“In a pandemic that has deprived life of its social uses, life appears to threaten society totally.”

—The Pandemic Community, Nil Mata Reyes

Survival is essential to life, but it's not all there is to it. It is *necessary but not sufficient*.

It is simple enough to speak of survival; we can define it with medical terminology. To speak about *life*, on the other hand, is inherently partisan. When one says *life*, one is always speaking of a *particular* way of living, a *particular* set of relations and affects and values. Those who refer to “life” as if what they mean by the word is self-evident always have some sort of agenda up their sleeves.

When our rulers try to focus discussion on how to assure our *survival*, we should change the subject to what sort of lives we want to lead in the post-pandemic world. There may be some authoritarian models that can indeed assure our survival, but none that can deliver the sort of *life* we desire. If we only haggle with our rulers over the jobs, wages, and healthcare essential to our survival, at the very best, we will come out of this with guaranteed housing

in identical quarantine units, digital identity bracelets coded with biological data, and lifetime Netflix subscriptions to dull our senses and distract us from lives that will make *Brave New World* look like *On the Road* by comparison. That's the most the technocrats have to offer. We have to dream bigger.

To speak of freedom is almost anathema in the year of the plague. Freedom is associated with the kind of reactionary buffoons that are still pretending that the virus itself is some sort of conspiracy. Yet, as argued above, without *freedom*, we won't be able to win or defend any gains we might make in the quality of our lives. Those who hold power will never grant us self-determination on our own terms—and without it, we are at their mercy. We have to change the balance of power.

Today, having already been robbed of almost everything that gives life meaning, many people feel they have nothing left to hold on to but survival in the barest biological sense. This is why they are willing to consider giving up even more. But if this crisis really does call everything into question, let's fight for what we really want.

From mutual aid projects and wildcat strikes to rent strikes and prison revolts, there are already bold stirrings of resistance all around the world. These efforts must give rise to networks that can confront the new totalitarianism and defeat it. The stakes have never been higher.

Pursuing life rather than survival means doing without guarantees. Those who wish to live fully must sometimes risk their lives. It is *meaning* that is at stake here, even more than safety.

What do you want? Free testing and treatment for COVID-19 and every other medical concern? To be able to use the machines at your employer's factory to produce ventilators rather than automobiles? To be free to utilize the medical facilities at your nursing job to care for your friends and neighbors who have never been able to afford proper medical treatment? To have opportunities to employ your skills and resources and creativity for *everyone's* benefit, rather than according to the dictates of the market? To abolish the economic pressures that compel people to risk spreading the virus and contributing to global climate change? To be able to travel to other lands without gentrifying the neighborhoods of the cities you visit? To be able to gather freely in festive crowds without fear of pandemics or police? To hold and be held, to thrive?

Answer these questions for yourself, dear reader, and let us find common cause on the basis of our wildest dreams. We'll join you in the streets at the conclusion of this nightmare—determined to bring all nightmares to an end.

“We've known what we've wanted this whole time, we just thought it was impossible. It is not. Not only is it possible, it is our only safe passage to the future.”

—“How to Fall”

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