

A Fork in the Road

Anathema

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The COVID-19 pandemic is bringing us to a fork in the road. On one side we see the near future that power wants: an atomized and remote workforce, a drastic decrease in spontaneous in-person social life, a big increase in who is considered surplus population as “non-essential” work is cancelled, and a bunch more surveillance, policing, and social control. On the other hand, the state is scared, it’s showing that government is capable of providing social security when the choice is between that and an uncontrolled breakdown in the social order. Neither of these paths lead to places that we, as anarchists, can feel good about. As this pandemic runs its course and society changes because of it, a new normal will slowly congeal as things cool down. What that normal looks like and how it comes about is still up in the air.

In the name of “public health” all sort of security measures are coming together to create an authoritarian wet dream. Internationally borders are becoming more difficult to cross, and anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Asian sentiment is on the rise as racists in the media and politics stir up fear hostility toward China. Earlier in the month video surfaced of an Asian couple being beaten by a group of people on a SEPTA platform, and Philly isn’t the only place seeing this sort of harassment, New York and Los Angeles have also experienced similar attacks. The state is encouraging what is being called “social distancing.” People are advised to stay home, cut down on social outings and gatherings, stay six feet apart, and digitize or give up on in-person social life. Schools and universities are closing left and right. At least one school is taking it even further, the University of Pennsylvania sent an email to its students March 14 explaining that social distancing is encouraged and that students “congregating on campus, or off campus, will face immediate intervention by Penn Police.”

It would not be surprising to see other institutions or even the city itself take on similarly drastic measures. The Board of Health has made forcing people to quarantine legal. Many workplaces are asking their workers to work from home, reducing their hours, or laying them off. Workers that are considered non-essential are falling through the cracks financially. What we see forming is a way of life that is sterile, policed, mediated, and closed off. When this pandemic tapers off, who’s to say that bosses, cops, and politicians won’t like the peace and quiet enough to keep using all these new ways of controlling the population? Once those in power have the means and the compliance of the population, how easy would it be for them to simply keep the ball rolling? Is what we’re seeing as a crisis response a glimpse into the new “normal” we’ll live after the crisis?

At the same time, power is scared. The state and capitalists have made some proposals and offers that would have seemed outrageous a few months ago. Comcast is offering free access to its internet networks to the poor, offering unlimited data, and has put a hold on shutting off connections. Verizon is making a similar offer. PECO, PGW, and Philadelphia Water Department have all pledged to not disconnect utilities even if they are owed money (for the time being). A resolution has passed that prevents utility shutoffs and also places a moratorium on evictions, foreclosures, and tax-lien sales until the pandemic clears. This means that the issue of losing ones housing during the crisis could be less likely if your landlord doesn't decide to lock you out illegally (although rent and tax debt will continue to drain our wallets). Federally the state is expanding who qualifies for unemployment, and figuring out how to send \$1200 to millions of US citizens. These offers and proposals go to show that the means of existence — shelter, warmth, water, and communication — could be provided to everyone by the state and capital. Of course these kinds of actions by the state are unlikely to last, the aversion of US politicians to anything that remotely resembles consideration for social well-being is derided as socialism or communism. Either way the services and infrastructure to take care of each other and our needs exist and outside a capitalist economy could be much more accessible than our current setup. With that in mind why would or should we entrust our health and social life to the institutions that could, but do not and never will, meet our needs? This pandemic only makes more clear the absurd priorities of the state and capitalists. In the unlikely event that the state and capitalists decided to adopt a welfare state model we still have no guarantees that this wouldn't be coupled with intense policing and isolation, that it would last, or would include those who are most oppressed.

There is a third way: resisting the isolation and policing, and also sidestepping a social safety net that could be pulled out from beneath us as soon as we're well enough to work and pay, we can take responsibility for ourselves and self-organize. As we lose our hours or jobs we are still expected to pay to live, to eat, to move about the city. As we worry for our individual and collective health, we can figure out how to meet our needs outside the systems that would rather see us sick and alone. Schools, offices, stores, and many other places are sitting empty. Can we imagine open-sourcing test kits and occupying labs to make them readily available? People are already organizing rent strikes and opening up squats to make life without work go from a crisis imposed disaster to a joyful freeing of our time and space? When food and health care supplies are in short supply, will we have squatted gardens and autonomous clinics to meet our needs? Will the local pharmacy continue to profit off our fears and desire to take care of ourselves, or will it be taken over to provide medicine, snacks, and hygiene supplies to whoever needs? Will we take advantage of the crisis to leave the city to start a farm or food forest on some under-policed plot of land? This pandemic is making power's disdain for free and healthy life more than clear. Will we respond by folding into ourselves, losing ourselves behind glowing blue screens and locked doors or will we make our lives our own and create the health and freedom we need to life in the midst of crisis?

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