

Prison-State UK comes into Law : Coronavirus

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The *Coronavirus Act 2020* in the UK is now in force for the next two years. It is a totalitarian coup by a right-wing government which has already shown its utter contempt for the judiciary, for parliament and for the people. Many of the provisions of this Act are already experienced by those on the margins of society, by dissidents, those in the prison and criminal justice system, the poor, and ethnic groups consistently disposed of by the police and the system, through poverty, imprisonment and death. Now the grand experiment is whether the kind of control infrastructure and total suspension of rights already administered to particular groups can be rolled out to the entire population.

The most manipulable provisions come, as ever, under the Mental Health sections. Always a good catch-all since dissidence, illegality and criticism of the existent is already considered by the system to be tantamount to mental illness, people can now be hospitalised and medicated on the say-so of a single approved clinician. This power of one also decides the fate of those awaiting trial, convicted persons (we wonder whether that refers to anyone with a criminal record regardless of their current status) and those currently serving prison time: the Act allows a single person to sign off on a transfer from a prison to mental hospital. To the cynical, it might imply that unruly prison populations or undesirables (either currently or historically) are now living under the threat of being summarily detained or if already detained, then transferred and sedated with a no-questions-asked decision by a single clinician.

Under coronavirus, the criteria that elects someone to the status of a person approved to implement these laws is considerably relaxed. Under the emergency laws, a person applying to volunteer as a health worker or social worker can be approved by a single senior administrator who believes the person is “fit, proper and suitably experienced”. Moreover, this administrator can approve a group of people who have organised themselves as such, presumably concerned ‘citizens groups’, without assessing each individual within that group. While the *public health* sections appear not to allow forced medical treatment, although it does allow for forced screening and assessment including the taking by force of biological samples from your body, the *mental health* provisions do allow people to be medicated by force, again to be decided by a single officer.

Dissidents and undesirables will also fall foul of the sections dealing with Potentially Infectious Persons (PIP), again this designation to be the whim of a single official. As they roll out their

totalitarian nightmare under the guise of coronavirus, all civil liberties are suspended. They do not expect this strange compliance to last. It cannot last. In the UK, there is barely any social welfare for people being rolled out and a huge swathe of the population, already broken by a decade of Tory rule, are hungry now. There have already been riots.

There are infectious diseases and there are infectious ideas: it is the latter that they are most keen to contain. For either, just read 'Potentially Infectious Person'! The new Act allows for arrest and detention, new search and entry laws, and retention of a potentially infectious person's things. Detention has a time limit but can be extended... and extended... and extended with no legal rights. Restrictions on a potentially infectious person's movement, place of residence, activities and social contact, previously reserved for those leaving prison but still on licence, could now be rolled out for anyone with potentially infectious ideas under the guise of public health concerns.

We are witnessing the building of a new wall where borders can be and are closed at a moment's notice. Countries are being sealed off overnight. This is how the horror happens. One day you enjoy "free movement", the next it is punishable by the law, if not death. The same status that refugees and undocumented people fleeing wars and shot at the borders have, blamed and vilified for the problems of the capitalist society.

The new laws surrounding the registration of death and disposal of bodies are some of the darkest pieces of this legislation. In essence, there is no longer a need for an inquest, no investigation into suspicious deaths, there is no safeguard surrounding the recording of a cause of death which can simply be written by a temporarily registered medical practitioner (not the doctor attending the death), no medical certificate is required for cremation or burial and the disposal of remains and the place of disposal is taken out of the hands of relatives and given to national or local authorities regardless of the wishes of the deceased or relatives. How easy it would be to disappear us under such conditions.

Totalitarianism is born under the pretence of necessity, of protection, of security. This moment is no different. Whatever the truth of the deadliness of this virus, the world created by this new legislation, the willingness of the people to accept it and the potential abuses written into it, are sobering. It reveals if not the plan then the opportunism of the totalitarian project which underlies the techno-industrial civilisation: immediate suspension of elections and referendums, no right of assembly or protest (which lockdown conditions have already illegalised), the implementation of the virtual and cashless surveillance society, the army on the streets as a matter of course, a police state whereby every move is monitored, absolute and unmitigated powers of detention (which must be experienced in isolation) and subjection of the individual to medical intervention, complete and punitive control of the movement, activity and association of individuals and groups, and a dismantling of safeguards over causes of death, recourse to an inquest and disposal of bodies. As scared and confused as people are by this pandemic, we must remember that the measures introduced by dictatorships to control populations often seem reasonable or even laudable at the time and are born of an irresistible logic that is embraced by the good citizen, whether that is the logic of communism, nationalism, protectionism or the logic of infection.

We must also remember that throughout history people fought back against the false logic of their social and political reality. They also risked being detained, medicated, tortured, and killed. The states of emergency being rolled out by our national governments are in danger of becoming the new normal if we do not fight back. We are always facing death, both physical and metaphysical. This is an extraordinary moment in which we may find we have more comrades

than we know as the system's collapse reveals not only people's crippling dependence on it, but also the forms of our potential liberation as critical masses experience new ways of being, new priorities and desires, that will not be met by a post-pandemic return to business as usual and also will not tolerate this state of emergency for long. As ever, our task is to find our leverage in this situation, to find our opportunities to engage according to our own anarchic principles, to organise against and despite of the tightening of control, to expose it for what it is and to break out of our isolation and the state of fear that is the real virus.

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