

Against Social Distancing

A Critique of the Ideology of Isolation

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As of now, multiple states and cities have been put into what amounts to near-complete lockdown. Most of the East Coast of the U.S. has prohibited mass gatherings of people and forced restaurants to stop serving people in the building. Some states have even started to enforce curfews and travel restrictions.

At this point, the speculation is not when this will abide, but how much worse it is going to get.

These measures have been based around a general preventative principle: social distancing. Social distancing has, in the span of a month, gone from tactic to unquestionable dogma, and I believe it is worthwhile to unpack how it functions ideologically and why it needs to be subjected to a critique.

Shame is not epidemiology

In a distinctly American way, our crises have brought out the Puritan core of our national psyche.

Social distancing has been predictably utilized as a form of control and shunning; you are a *bad person* if you go out or meet other people because you are putting *your needs* above that of the group. You are being *bad* because you are helping spread the disease. Good people stay inside and follow orders.

Trying to shame people for going outside is more pathological than the disease itself because it completely fails to grasp the current situation. As hard as it is for some people to hear this, diseases aren't spread by *bad people*. Anyone can get sick and there are going to be a large number of people who, despite practicing social isolation, will contract the disease and there will be an even larger number who, despite venturing outside and coming into contact with others, will emerge completely unscathed.

Diseases infect people, no matter how self-righteous they are.

The elevation of social isolation into a dogmatic belief in part stems from fear. People seek to perform certain self-congratulating rituals in order to protect themselves from contagion, sealing themselves away in hermetically sealed apartment units from the contagion of selfish and bad people on the outside. The underlying Protestantism of it all shines through as people care more about shaming those they see as disobedient or lazy, trying to berate others into submitting to their personal rituals *because they identify personal moral failure with biological contagion*. This was true long before any disease broke out; this crisis just helped make this all the more explicit.

They break rules, don't they?

The leadup to the full lockdown saw the scolds and fear mongers pulling out their hair in panic at the sight of people eating at restaurants, going to the gym, clubbing at bars, going to church, etc. Rideshare drivers breaking down in tears at the idea of dropping someone off at a club, how could they be so *selfish*? Why aren't they locking themselves in their panic rooms at the first sign of danger?

Liberated from the obligation of hours of commutes and direct supervision, God forbid people want to take advantage of their time while they still have it.

People were going out to eat or drinking in bars because they knew their time was limited. Shutdown was imminent and in many ways this last gasp only accelerated the perception of doomsday. The worst is assumed: the person at the gym only cares about their own health (an unforgivable crime) and needs to be stopped for their own good. Contemporary ideology is entirely convinced that people are not making calculations or being strategic when they go out to a club full of healthy young people or seeing friends one last time before they close ranks among their family; no, they're just being hedonistic pleasure-seekers and for this they need to have their movement restricted, activities monitored, and behavior castigated in public.

The reaction against social isolation is a reaction against social control.

The state steps in

At the time of writing, more than a fifth of Americans are under orders to stay home by the state.¹ Social isolation is now no longer a suggestion, but a mandate. Puritanical ethos is law.

Faith in the state, of course, is poorly placed. Its goal at the moment is to preserve two things: its image and the economy. Your health, which *will get worse* if you're forced to stay in a 30 square foot apartment for months at a time, is not the concern. You as an obedient citizen are expected to make sacrifices for the greater good and let the authorities make all the decisions about where you're allowed to go and who you're allowed to see.

No good crisis isn't going to be taken advantage of.

Works and plagues

“This Strife is good for mortals”

—Hesiod, *Works and Days*

This contracting loss of physical freedom has come with a strange kind of liberation from white collar work. The digital economy has turned everyone's bedroom into their office and, essentially their whole world (unless, of course, you're working in any kind of job that actually matters for social reproduction).

The divide, now more explicit than ever, is between “survival jobs,” consisting of a hodgepodge mix of Uber Eats drivers, supermarket workers, retail employees, bus drivers, and medics, now is faced with the endless task of making society run despite being exposed to the worst pandemic of their lifetime. Most of these jobs, especially in food service, have no benefits or job protection, revealing again the class stratification inherent in the service economy.

The ideal worker in the eyes of the state now is not the “survival worker,” despite the allowances they are given to travel relatively freely (provided it is during working hours). In fact, the perfect worker is the one working from home, hidden from everyone else and slowly losing their mind to cabin fever and lack of face to face social contact. This is the upstanding citizen, one whose whole life can be reduced to a single room: “put your head down and work away, just wait for things to blow over, don't do anything that might make things more difficult for us.”

¹ www.cnn.com

Technocracy and obedience

The widespread and near-universal adoption (at least among the well-meaning) of social isolation in many ways speaks to the wholly technocratic and elitist way in which crisis is still being handled in the present world.

There is no concept of community solutions, but rather a top-down command economy of disaster capitalism with UBI characteristics. Failures of the centralized state are taken to be a lack of strong leadership or lack of obedience by the populace. People just need to listen to the experts, damn it!

Social isolation is a catechism and public health experts are its clergy. Their word here is law and ordinary people apparently have no idea that *coming into contact with sick people spreads disease*. Young Americans are medieval peasants ignorant of modern medicine, rather than people taking calculated risks about exposure and treatment. It is up to the quarantine state apparatus to make these decisions for them.

There is no room for debate or discussion, only obedience. Don't think, just act; otherwise people will die.

Christ among the lepers

“Now on his way to Sacramento, Jesus traveled along the border between Stockton and Modesto. As he was going into an encampment, ten men who had breathing difficulties met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a hoarse voice, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’

When he saw them, he said, ‘Go, show yourselves to your family.’ And as they went, they were cured.”

—Luke 17:11–14

The isolationist impulse produces scared, obedient, and atomized individuals. Freedom is selfish, autonomy is a contagion.

Healing doesn't happen through isolation; isolation is a way to shut off and hide away the sick and dying. Rather than threaten the already buckling and incompetent health infrastructure, the contagious are told to stay home or risk being shipped off to somewhere even more isolated and inhospitable.

Our collective imagination is itself diseased. In the face of chaos we wait for a savior to swoop in from the outside and solve this problem for us. We felt disempowered before this crisis even began and now that what remains of society has ground to a halt we are even less capable of imagining ourselves as playing any role in our own salvation.

Never forget that the state and its legion of Ivy-certified experts are more than willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives to Mammon to preserve itself. Ask yourself, is the remedy to be christ among the lepers, or the city on the hill?

From crisis to community and back again

In their commentary on the pandemic, CrimethInc. made a series of comments that I think are deeply relevant here:

We won't be safer if our society is reduced to a bunch of atomized individuals. That would neither protect us from the virus nor from the stress of this situation nor from the power grabs that capitalists and state authorities are preparing to carry out. As much as the elderly are at risk from the virus, for example, older people are already dangerously isolated in this society; cutting them off from all contact with others will not preserve their physical or mental health. All of us need to be embedded in tight-knit groups in a way that maximizes both our safety and our collective capacity to enjoy life and take action...Within your group, as long as no one has the virus, you can still hug, kiss, make food together, touch the same surfaces—as long as you agree about the level of risk you are collectively ready to tolerate and communicate about it when a new risk factor arises.²

The ideology of isolation is a presumption of guilt before innocence, of a hidden sin that you carry with you that can unknowingly seep into the ones you live and drain them of life before your very eyes. The point of social isolation is to make you fear yourself as a carrier, one with an impure seed that you cannot know until it's too late.

This is a kind of original sin where we are contaminated from the start. But this is not who we are. Community lets us be giving and healing and protective in a way that grants us agency rather than submission. We need mutual aid now more than ever.

The Faustian bargain we are each presented with is that it is better to be safe in Hell than sick in Heaven.

Conclusions

Every crisis in the 21st century plays itself out the same as before. Experts, despite being completely unprepared for what's happening and offering solutions arguably as calamitous as their problem, are elevated to the positions of unquestionable authority in the discourse and dissent is treated as yet another contagion to be sanitized.

My advice to the reader is the following:

1. Be critical, even of well meaning and justifiable disease containment measures.
2. Every crisis is an opportunity. Don't be afraid to take advantage of this one.
3. All measures can become a new normal. If the state has its way, the pandemic will never break.

Remember, *Sloboda se ne prodaje za sve kuga maske svijeta; Liberty is not sold for all the plague masks in the world.*

—Dabtara

² crimethinc.com

Appendix: Some points of clarification

After circulating my first draft of this piece, less than a week had gone by before there have been some radical shifts in the current social climate that need to be addressed. We are living in tumultuous times and anything written runs the risk of undoing itself before it can even be published.

First, let me reiterate that the object of critique here is not the practice of social distancing itself, but rather its position in the contemporary discourse around the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing does save lives (when done sensibly), but the problem is how this act of potential solidarity is being transmuted into a double-edged sword of alienation and distrust.

“Social distancing” as it stands is being conflated with social isolation, turning the jogger on the street into a potential carrier and your neighbor into Typhoid Mary. Paranoia leads to messianism at a time when it should be clear that the state cannot (nor wants to) save us. Hucksters and cultists can look to gurus and prayer for solutions, but radicals need to recognize the danger of idolizing isolation and start working toward providing concrete and material aid in the face of imminent crisis.

It should be clear to us by now that we need mutual aid. It is going to be quite literally a matter of life or death. This is not a call to play doctor for the sake of boosting one’s ego, but if you believe collapse is coming then you better start brushing up on basic first aid skills. For your own sake, don’t let yourself be in the position where something goes wrong when all the beds in the hospital are full.

Finally, as much as I would like to be optimistic at a time like this, I know the hopes of this opening up anything but fragmentation are slim. We need to be in it for the long haul and it’s going to be rough for the foreseeable future. Take care of yourself and take care of the ones you love, and most importantly, be ready for the worst. There will be moments of genuine compassion and solidarity that will give you hope, and now is not the time for self-flagellating pessimism.

Even with sober senses, the best we can say is that the future is deeply uncertain. I still have hope that between system collapse and dystopia, we might be able to crack open history and claim a little freedom for ourselves.

—Dabbara

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