
Love of the State in the time of Covid

critisticuffs

“**The State is back**”: the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a new spotlight on the actions of the State. Democratic states have taken steps that seem unthinkable in normal times – nationalising industries, coordinating the distribution of useful goods, paying the wage bill of millions of workers, effectively closing down many businesses and making it a **criminal offence** to leave the home without a “reasonable excuse”. It is therefore worth asking if the authority ruling over us is remaking itself.

1 What is the R value of bad ideas? Rumours of the demise of state power have been greatly exaggerated

COVID-19 has given us ready material to show just how wrong the popular idea is that state power has given way to corporate power as a consequence of globalisation. Somewhat inconveniently for proponents of this thesis, it was not Unilever or Apple that did or even could spring into action in response to the pandemic. Instead, *states* closed borders, **suspended globalisation** and even ordered Wetherspoons to close down. It could not be any other way, there is no other actor in a capitalist society able to pull off the feat of suspending it. The reason they could do so is because it has been states all along who have been making the decisions and who defined the rules.

Those who saw transnational corporations forcing their agenda on powerless nation-states through a forest of acronyms – NAFTA, the WTO, TTIP and the IMF – ignored who was and is making trade agreements (**or not**). As **states base their might** on the economic success in the private hands of their citizens, it is not surprising that states with successful corporations – the US, Germany, the UK – would want to widen the economic playing field for them – nor that states with less successful economies might make the calculation that it is better for them to permit such companies in and partake in their successes. Once a new factor arose – a virus – those calculations were updated.

Although COVID-19 has made it harder to sustain this particular wrong idea, it has encouraged a different one – namely that the actions and obvious power of the State in response to the pandemic show its usefulness as a tool for a reasonable cause. It merely needs to be won over to the light side of the force (i.e. the Left needs to be in control) to perpetuate that state of being: to ensure that the new normal is not the old normal. In the words of the **Novara Media Team**: “Already economic orthodoxies – things we’ve been told could never change – are shifting right in front of our eyes. The right find themselves talking about stimulus and basic income, intervention and social planning. The financial system is convulsing. The world which emerges on the other side of this crisis will look different, as opinions shift on the usefulness of the market and what the state can do. As this crisis develops, we believe the left will also need to think seriously about how to shape what comes next.”

What these writers pick up on is that the really existing central authority has been given a strong justification for its existence by the current pandemic. Through its very actions it appears that the State’s reason for being is to coordinate crisis responses: identify hotspots, assemble scientific expertise, coordinate the production and distribution of disaster relief and suspend the normal course of business

while sustaining key elements of society to guarantee their continued existence. As persuasive as this case might be, it is utterly wrong. Rather, it is the free market (which as we've seen is currently being put on ice across the world) and not the need for central planning in a crisis which necessitates the State's authority. It is the State's rule of law which establishes **private property** and all the conflicts that derive from it: between employers and employees, renters and landlords, buyers and sellers, competitors within an industry, the list goes on. This society, where the owners of property exploit each other's dependence on that property, is one which requires omnipotent deterrence to ensure these conflicts play out within the rules set out by the State. The decisive instance to suspend this condition of mutual antagonism is the same which guarantees the conflict and is required by it in the first place.

2 Science within reason

This point of view, which sees the State as a means of reason, is actively encouraged by the Government. Chief scientific advisors get air time, scientific panels get assembled and their evidence displayed, and politicians insist on "**following the science**". Yet, this is not the age of Plato's philosopher kings. This is already evidenced by the fact that each government selects its own, national scientific experts. These thus assembled scientists can then present their advice, but what matters in the end is not if it *is* convincing but if it **convinces those in power**. When the Government was finally persuaded by the scientific evidence it requested, it put a halt to most of social life in the UK. With the same authority, it is now weighing up the scientific evidence again – according to its relevance for the purpose it pursues. The **case of Neil Ferguson** is a lesson about the relationship of authority and reason: science is there to inform the authority to make effective decisions, but it shall not interfere with its priorities. Here, being a trusted public scientific figure, "the architect of the lockdown", can become a problem when some parties push to ease the lockdown measures, so that missteps **are trotted out** when they are convenient.¹ The message is received and scientists **demonstrate the humble submission** of the authority of the better argument to the really existing authority.

On the other hand, the claim to scientific rule by the British State is **met with disbelief** given the COVID-19 death toll, for example by those who think that the State has yet to be appropriated by the Left to realise its reasonable potential. Rather "incompetence" is the word of the time. The mistake at the heart of this critique is the presumption that the purpose of the Government's interventions is purely to minimise the death toll; on the contrary, reason is still at the heart of the decisions, but it is reason with a different target than that assumed.

Death rates are a datum politicians, in all countries, are comfortable calculating with if they are manageable – as we see with, for example, **limits on fine-air pollutants**. However, COVID-19 threatened to

¹ The cute left-wing theory – that the Government would sacrifice one of its key scientific advisors to "hide" a well-reported statistic that does not go away – can confidently be ignored.

be anything but calculable: its transfer, fatality and hospitalisation rates, its long term effects, its interactions with other health and weather conditions were and are unknowns, such that the scientific advisors of the Government **noted** the unpredictable nature of the disease: “On 27th January 2020, SPI-M-O concluded that while there wasn’t sufficient evidence to estimate a reasonable worst case scenario (RWC) for 2019-nCoV, the RWC for pandemic influenza would be an appropriate planning scenario at that point. SPI-M-O will keep updating their assessment of the reasonable worst case as the outbreak progresses.” By mid-march a reasonable worst-case scenario was drawn up estimating 250,000 deaths, a cost too high for the Government to accept.

Boris Johnson laid out why he was shutting down society in his **March 23 speech**: “To put it simply, if too many people become seriously unwell at one time, the NHS will be unable to handle it – meaning more people are likely to die, not just from Coronavirus but from other illnesses as well.” Here, Johnson gives an end – saving lives – and a means – allowing the NHS to cope. Since then, the Government has come under increasing criticism on its track record on achieving that end: near **60,000 people died**, the **disease ravaged care homes due to offloaded NHS patients**; doctors and nurses became sick because of **insufficient PPE**. Yet, the Government does not accept this criticism but rather announces victory. In the **words of Boris Johnson**: “These enormous sacrifices [he is referring to being cut off from family and friends due to the lockdown; CC] have paid off. We have seen the number of positive cases plateau and fall, even as testing capacity has increased tenfold. The number of people admitted to hospital with Covid has steadily fallen. Despite predictions that critical care capacity would struggle to cope, the NHS was emphatically not overwhelmed.” Boris Johnson asks not to be judged on the number of actual deaths but on the NHS coping and thus preventing a larger, unacceptable, death toll.

This standard is not just one for Sunday speeches but is implemented in the **five tests** set out by the Government for easing the lock down: (1) protecting “the NHS’s ability to cope”, (2) a “sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates”, (3) the rate of infection “decreasing to manageable levels across the board”, (4) “testing capacity and Personal Protective Equipment, [...] in hand, with supply able to meet future demand” and (5) preventing the risk of “a second peak of infections that overwhelms the NHS”. The Government is not out to minimise the death toll but rather to achieve a *manageable* level of excess deaths. When Johnson spells out his brutal standard – the crisis is manageable and the death toll acceptable to the Government – the proponents of the socialism of the 21st century and their progressive siblings are so preoccupied with their fantasy of doing a better job at running the capitalist state that they accuse the Government in all earnestness of “**complacency**”, “**inadequacy**” and “**incompetence**”.

3 Who needs a People’s Army when you have the consent of the people

To curb the infection rate, the British Parliament – along with many other democratic states – suspended rights that were seen as fundamental to a democracy, such as leaving the house without a

“reasonable excuse“. Similarly, the Government, along with many other democratic governments, is planning and deploying an invasive contact tracing programme to handle a second wave. As a result, some fear that COVID-19 is providing a **pretext** for the State to give itself the kind of authoritarian powers that it wanted all along, others that these powers could be abused.

First, these concerns that the State might be taking an authoritarian turn underestimate **how effective democratic rule is as a tool of domination**. The **key productive power** of the present rule is that its subjects agree with what is being done to them. We only have to look at how little enforcement has been necessary to mobilise people to follow the official guidelines to understand how productive a popular mandate is. It's **much more efficient** to be able to simply tell people to stay indoors than it is to flood the streets with cops because people distrust the Government's “stay at home” message – suspecting an ulterior motive behind it (as they do in other countries).

More importantly, these concerns invoke the idea of a power without measure or purpose. The irony of this warning of overreach and abuse is that it plays down the really existing authority and its publicly discussed purposes. State rule has a purpose. Not a hidden one, but one that is the daily subject of heated debate. The need to balance economic and population health is debated openly in Parliament, and newspapers never tire of weighing in on these questions. So the idea that there might be nefarious intentions at play behind COVID-19 measures ignores the grim reality of the stated intentions behind them.

In his **“first, careful steps” speech** on May 10, the PM laid out the trade-offs involved in the Government's calculations: “We must continue to control the virus and save lives. And yet we must also recognise that this campaign against the virus has come at colossal cost to our way of life. We can see it all around us in the shuttered shops and abandoned businesses and darkened pubs and restaurants.” Furloughing, loans, NHSX apps and emergency hospitals exist so that “the economy” can start again at a point when the virus can be controlled and its effects managed. In the Government's calculations the COVID-19 death rate is one datum, GDP growth at home – and abroad in the realms of competitors and rivals – another. So they deploy the best science available to them, and rely on the **freedom of their citizens from the things they need** to send workers back to work so that they can **“be heroes”**. Their sacrifice, as usual, will pay off.