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The Destructive Response to SARS-COV-2: Maintaining a Dignity of Intelligence in a Time of Social Modification

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Both scientific and medical debate continues to unfold in not only the dubious nature of what we currently identify as COVID-19, but also – and more intensely perhaps – over the ongoing global response to the virus itself. At the same time, however, this ever-important issue of COVID lockdowns is being glossed over daily by the more sensationalized stories of racial protests.

In many ways, the protests provide an illegitimate cover; an unfortunate distraction of sorts which diverts the public's attention away from the shoddy and unsustainable COVID precautions which clearly deserve to be further examined. Additionally, as is the classical tactic of any divisive agenda, the racial climate that we now find ourselves in has successfully (and incredulously) served to create even further partition between individuals, communities, groups, and even the very same ethnic races that have labored to overcome the oppression that has plagued the West for so long. Ironically, we now find ourselves regressing to knee-jerk policies that actually *promote*segregation rather than protect against it.

Consequently, this new division in our society has delayed our collective resolve to soberly examine the destructive response to SARS-COV-2. According to a Pew Research Center poll from June 29th, there is a general trend of decreasing intensity when it comes to the public consumption of news around COVID-19. The Pew study specifically mentioned that

> "the June survey, which took place as demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd were dominating headlines, shows a decrease in those paying very close attention to the COVID-19 outbreak. The 39% of U.S. adults reporting this highest level of engagement is down from 46% in late April and 57% in late March, when the outbreak was first forcing shutdowns around the country" (Pew Research Center, June 29). Similarly, an Ipsos Reid poll from
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> June 18th concludes that "a majority of people in nine out of 16 major countries say there are much bigger issues to worry about than the coronavirus with all protests going on in the United States and elsewhere" (Ipsos Reid, June 18).

I would agree that this diversion has also served to not only redirect the public focus, but by its very insistence as an urgent 'social' issue has also served to entrench the public's original perceptions and beliefs around COVID-19 without any further critical thinking.

In other words, by having to quickly readjust our concerns to the newly-created theatrics of racial demonstrations, we no longer have the time or sense of import to properly examine

how the official responses to coronavirus are continuing – and will continue – to affect our civilization and our culture as a people. By default then, whatever we believed about COVID-19 before the racial unrest will simply remain our default perception, simply because we are now being encouraged to look in other directions. As such, the unspoken trend around the coronavirus at this point is that it no longer needs as much critical addressing and that we now simply need to acclimate to the "new normal." In the meantime, it is worth taking a fresh look at where public opinion now rests in regards to the lockdown culture.

As far as perspectives around the COVID-19 lockdown responses are concerned, I see two variations of people that make up the general bulk of the public body.

The most visible segment are those who are clearly on board with the standardized precautions that were put in place; things like social distancing, mask-wearing, hand sanitizing, business closures and sheltering-in-place.

It would also seem evident that this group is considerably the larger of the two, given the findings of a Pew Research poll from back in April 16th. As the poll demonstrated,

> "66% of Americans say they are more concerned that these (COVID) restrictions will be lifted too quickly, while 32% say they are more concerned they won't be lifted quickly enough" (Pew Research Center, April 16).

Within this first group of people there exists a spectrum of belief as to how much precaution is actually necessary. Accordingly, some will rigidly adhere to whatever source of personal protection is available to them in order to avoid getting the virus, while others will appear to casually meander in and out of protective motions almost at random – donning masks when the moment "seems right" or else socially distancing from complete strangers, yet not for people that are more familiar to them. In some ways, a double-standard of protective behavior can be seen in this end of the precautionary spectrum even though, to some degree, they ultimately do believe in the risk of transmission and likewise believe that it should be avoided.

The second group of people is much less visible. In this group, the individuals have not necessarily bought into the official narrative of COVID-19 (much less the exhaustive protective measures to avoid getting it), yet they are largely seen to go along with the proverbial flow of everyone else for the reason that there appears to be no other appropriate recourse. As it is with any social animal, many of the people within this latter group do not see the sense in disrupting the established order and, for the sake of preservation of both the group and the self, are seen to blend in with the rest of the population while quietly (if not grudgingly) adhering to protective rituals whenever the situation demands it.

Like the first group, however, this second cluster of people has its own form of spectrum as well. On one end of the spectrum are those who, while not buying into the sensationalism around COVID-19, will nevertheless wear their masks and will keep their social distance merely to protect against disapproval from others. On the other end of the spectrum are those who, in recognizing the severe social deficits of such protective behaviors, actually do wish to demonstrate some form of resistance to the collective prescription. These are the individuals whose aim is specifically geared towards the education and redirection of the

public's response to the lockdown culture, and who are willing to actually speak out against it.

Regardless of where anyone happens to be on the spectrum, the underlying concern for a COVID skeptic is ultimately around the cost of social deviance and the price to be paid for visibly stepping out of line amidst the virtual tidal wave of COVID propaganda. Putting it simply, to not be part of the mainstream corona-collective brings with it the risk of a severe social backlash – primarily in the form of being accused as a 'deviant' and, by extension, as being categorically responsible for exacerbating the pandemic even further.

I would also argue that this identification and targeting of social deviance is enforced even further in times of civil urgency, as a recent situation in Australia appropriately demonstrates.

In response to a recent upsurge of reported coronavirus infections in the Australian state of Victoria, Premier Daniel Andrews has been urging the public to comply with mobile COVID-testing initiatives that were recently rolled out in a few municipalities. In a press release on June 30th, the Premier lamented his finding that almost a thousand people had actually refused the request to be tested. Interestingly, the suggested reasons for such refusals were labelled as *"lack of understanding about the dangers of the virus, privacy reasons to feeling uncomfortable about the invasiveness of a nose or throat swab test,"* according to University of NSW epidemiologist Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, who was quoted in an article published in the newspaper, *The Age*, later in the day.

Never mind mentioning the possibility that some of these refusals were born out of an educated principle to deliberately *not* comply. Never mind the idea that some refusals were expressed specifically as a result of a citizen's own personal research into the nature of the pandemic, and therefore had a constitutional right to refuse the test in the first place.

While the article does pay tribute to the ethical and constitutional problem of enforced COVID testing, there is an interesting caveat to this inconvenient freedom that is raised by Liberty Victoria spokesman Michael Stanton. While Stanton dutifully points to the importance of respecting people's personal choice in the matter, he nevertheless reassures the public that the number of people who refused to be tested was pretty small by comparison, and therefore "statistically" insignificant. He added that *"it would be too high a cost [on people's personal liberties] to in effect forcibly require people to undertake a medical procedure against their will, especially when so many people are consenting."* In other words, as long as the majority is on board with the official WHO-endorsed narrative, then it's not worth worrying about the smaller numbers of insubordinates (The Age, June 30th).

Unsurprisingly, the response to these acts of social deviances in the state of Victoria led to an exhibition of public shaming by the Premier himself, who essentially derided the 928 refusers as posing an irresponsible risk to the rest of the population while simultaneously praising the recent 21,000 consenters as making a *"powerful contribution to our fight against this virus."*

In other words, we are watching the narrative unfold in such as to now ascribe a currency of morality to the decision of consenting versus refusing. Simply put, the idea is being generated that you are an irresponsible person for refusing to be tested, but that you are a

morally righteous person for agreeing. Furthermore, the portrayal of urgency in Victoria is such that the public is arguably given little time to coherently reflect on the principled questions around mobile testing initiatives, and consequently have to make some pretty quick choices about it. Human nature being what it is, one is likely to justify the personal choices they make in any given situation – even if they find that they were rushed or cornered into doing so.

The result? A society that is divided even further based on moral ascriptions that do not critique; they merely assume.

The real problem, however, lies in the rapid way in which this moral ascription becomes an entrenched norm within a society. To be clear, it is not the social dictator or a nation's commander-in-chief who successfully secures the public's perspective on a matter; it is the public itself that decides its own fate. To be sure, the civil corporation that makes up a society is wholesale complicit in the shifting of that society's norms. Simultaneously, any individual that chooses to resist such shifting norms is viewed as socially deviant and possibly even antisocial.

In a 2016 edition of Sociological Research, Tatyana Shipunova made the decisive point that:

> "The social control of deviance, like everything connected with it (e.g., institutions, policies, government officials, specialists, professionals, strategies, methods, etc.) is given a special status because it "functions" for the betterment of society, removing (eliminating) or minimizing the harm of deviance. In this sense, social control acts as a moral idea with 'ideological immunity.' It is to be accepted prima facie, before the results (effects) of its institutions are known. Its expansion is theoretically limitless, since the variety of forms and types of behavior that may cause social discontent ('social evil') is infinite" (Shipunova, Sociological Research, 2016, p.32).

In short, the widespread behavior of the public in response to a new social doctrine (i.e. a warning given by "experts") that leads to the overall shifting of a norm so that it goes from "new" to standard. The sooner it becomes entrenched, the more quickly the former standard will be forgotten. What may initially be regarded as an inconvenience is eventually accepted as a necessary shift in public life due to the "evils" that it is purportedly preventing. Appropriately, Shipunova observes that *"it is at the micro level that social control really takes place."*

Finally, we see how profound a role the Internet itself plays in the formalizing of such new behaviors. Shipunova describes how the overall Internet infrastructure, *"with its administrators, moderators, website owners, online communities, and individual users, controls the parameters of social sui generis reality by reflecting on this reality, modifying existing social norms, rules, and patterns of behavior that are first broadcast horizontally via virtual communication from one user to another, which then become internalized – and transforming these patterns into everyday praxis."* If this process is successful, it ultimately serves to *"significantly modify social norms."*

With these things in mind, it is easier to observe how the public perception of lockdown measures has largely found itself in a decidedly consumer-oriented mentality – particularly since a robust sense of urgency has been applied to the situation. Consequently, anyone who finds themselves in a more open-minded frame of perspective faces the ever-

challenging reality of being considered a risk to the rest of the society. Effectively, what was once considered a dystopian social practice has very quickly been adopted as "prima facie" prescriptions that carry incredible power on account of being so morally-infused, as they are.

As we find ourselves in such a rapidly-shifting global environment that appears to be hell-bent on distracting the masses, my recommendation is that we hold firm allegiance to our original sense of curiosity. We pay honorable tribute to our innate intelligence by not getting swept up in the pseudo-morality that is now so suddenly ascribed to these global events (particularly referring to the cementing of poorly-contrived COVID-consumer values through the unusual diversion to racial injustice issues).

More specifically, consider that the newly-charged racial demonstrations and behavioral modifications that are being urged on society are simply there to eliminate dissension. At the same time, however, they provide us with a unique opportunity to observe, learn, and be informed by. At the end of the day, it is up to us at the individual level, as to whether our learning has been fostered by an agenda of wanting to avoid deviance, or to instead search diligently for what is actually helping us move forwards as a society.

I urge us all to choose the latter.

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