

Moralising Hoarding, Panic Buying and Coronavirus

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Theme: [History](#)

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Hoarding as moral aberration and ethical breach: the term has recently become the subject of scorn in coronavirus chatter. In terms of mental disorders, [it is](#) “characterized by persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions”, though the Coronavirus Hoarder is a breed that adds urgent bulk acquisition to the shopping equation. If you part with it, take advantage of making a buck along the way.

Hoarding products in times of crisis is condemned by those in power as unpatriotic, against the community and just plain rude. The empty supermarket shelf is considered the devilish outcome of this. Yet, shelves still remain empty, at least for periods of time. Despite limits imposed on purchases, the hoarder remains active, fearing the pandemic apocalypse, the lockdown, self-isolation and total quarantine.

The central motivation is fear, but it has worthy fuel. Do not trust the government; question the authorities. They, after all, were late to the party. With COVID-19 being enshrouded in garments of misinformation, or at the very least elements of incomplete information, the tendency is further accentuated.

The pieties against bulk buying are accumulating, inversely proportionate to diminishing opportunities to purchase. Writing for the Danbury, Connecticut-based *News-Times*, Chris Powell acknowledges that households should stock up on the necessities, but only for a few days. To hoard “for worse than that is antisocial and generates fear. If serious shortages develop, will people consider themselves Americans, all in it together, sharing as necessary and helping their government as it tries its best, or will patriotism and civic duty dissolve into every man for himself?”

The reaction from authorities has ranged from the imposition of regulations to hectoring unprincipled shopping. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has gone so far as to regard [panic buying as unpatriotic](#), a slight against his understanding of the Australian character. “On bulk purchasing of supplies: Stop hoarding. I can’t be more blunt about it. Stop it.” Such behaviour was neither “sensible” nor “helpful and it has been one of the most disappointing things I have seen in Australian behaviour in response to this crisis.”

Interestingly enough, such scolding attitudes have done little to stem the craze. As Morrison should himself be most familiar with, any snark directed against voters tends to bite back. He, after all, was the beneficiary of an election victory in which his opponents were termed smug types prone to woke obsessions, preachy about the environment and condescending to those pro-mining “Quiet Australians”. Now, Morrison demands “Australia’s common sense cooperation with ... very clear advisory positions. Stop doing it. It’s un-Australian and must stop.” Australians, quiet or otherwise, are panicked and not taking much notice.

Australia’s agriculture minister David Littleproud has also taken to the stage of publicity to

condemn bulk shopping practices, calling such shoppers parasites. “I appreciate people are worried about Covid-19,” [he wrote](#) in *Guardian Australia*, “but those fighting in the aisles are more in danger of catching the disease by their actions than we ever are of running out of food.” Farmers were the noble ones, going about their business of supplying food, in contrast to those “frantic shoppers”. The decision by supermarkets to restrict purchases on certain products, change shopping hours and suspend online grocery orders, had been sensible.

In Canada, the panic has been sufficiently gripping to cause concern. The pattern is familiar: a spate of rushed purchases, the emptying of shelves, and the constant warning by those supposedly in the know that all is well in the supply chain. A survey conducted by Dalhousie University and Angus Reid between March 13 and 15 found that 71 percent of Canadians were concerned about COVID-19, with 41 percent purchasing additional groceries and supplies as a direct response. Then come the voices of authority, attempting to appease and reassure. Marc Fontin, president of the Retail Council of Canada in Quebec, [claimed](#) that “Canadians do not need to panic”. Over the weekend, stores would be “back to almost normal.”

This has not been enough. The panic-driven purchaser and diligent hoarder loom like troubling spectres. Policies have been introduced by specific drug wholesalers such as McKesson. Andrew Forgione, a spokesperson for the company, [spoke](#) about the taking of “proactive steps to support responsible ordering, including temporarily adjusting daily customer ordering for some medications and certain daily essentials.” Canadian consumer or retailers, he explained, had little reason to “mass order products.” But order, they do.

Some hoarders have even become accidental, and reviled celebrities. A Tennessee man, Amazon seller Matt Colvin, went so far as to acquire 17,700 bottles of hand sanitizer. The intention was not so much to hoard as make a killing online, selling the items at marked up prices. The intention might have been seen as distinctly American, even patriotic: take advantage of adverse conditions, plan ahead and make money from it. “I’ve been buying and selling things for 10 years now,” [he told](#) the *New York Times*. “There’s been hot product after hot product. But the thing is, there’s always another one on the shelf.”

The interest of the Tennessee attorney general’s office was piqued. An investigation was commenced into possible price gouging. As this took place, Colvin had a change of heart, wishing to donate the supplies. Prosecutors, however, are intent on proceeding with the action.

More militant operations have been recorded in other countries in an effort to rein back the dedicated hoarder. In Maharashtra’s Jalna city, police and officials of the Food and Drug Administration [conducted a joint operation](#) against a shop owner Hastimal Bamb for allegedly hoarding 18,900 masks and possessing 730 bottles of fake hand sanitisers.

Across the border, similar stories have surfaced. In Karachi’s Baloch Colony a certain shopkeeper by the name of Zaheer was arrested during the week for hoarding sanitisers then, according to a [police statement](#), selling “them for more than triple the actual price.”

Talk about community, toughing matters out, enduring together, provide salve for the bruised soul. It does not stop greed, nor does it stem opportunity. Responding to pandemics, as to conflict, brings its chances for profiteers and the desperate. No political potentate, whatever the measure, can stem it entirely. The coronavirus hoarder is here to

stay – at least for the near future.

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