

Pandemic Revelations

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In early April I posted an essay called “Questions About the Pandemic from the Point-of-View of Ivan Illich.” It was written mainly to clarify my own mind and to share my thoughts with a few like-minded friends, but, thanks to the good offices of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who reposted my essay on Quod Libet, a site where he blogs, the piece was widely read, reproduced, and translated.

Since then I have been asked a number of times whether I have changed my mind about what I wrote in April. No. But I have continued to reflect on the meaning of what has overtaken us. One result is an article that I wrote for the Oct. issue of the Literary Review of Canada, which is available at: <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2020/10/the-prognosis/>. Here are some further reflections:

In an earlier essay, I tried to explain why a policy of total quarantine, the so-called lockdown, could gain wide acceptance, despite its being highly destructive of livelihood, social morale and, ultimately, public health.

How could people even countenance a term like lockdown, with its overtones of imprisonment and total control, let alone coming to think well of it and condemning and shaming its violators and critics? My argument was that societies like Canada had, for a long time, been “practicing” – we’d already turned the concepts on which our pandemic policies have been founded into common sense.

These concepts include risk, safety, pro-active management, science as a mighty oracle speaking in a single authoritative voice, and above all, Life, as a quantum to be preserved at all costs. Gradual naturalization of these concepts has made the policy that has been followed seem so rational, so inevitable, and so entirely without alternative that it has been possible to freely vilify its opponents and largely exclude them from media which might have made their voices politically influential. But knowing this doesn’t make it any easier to swallow. What has come into stark relief during the pandemic may have been already latently there, but to see it actualized as the outline of a new social order is still a compelling and somewhat frightening experience. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to look further into what the pandemic has revealed and brought to light.

SCIENCE

From the very beginning of the pandemic, there has been a steady drumbeat of scientific

criticism of the policy of total quarantine – the name I will give to the attempt to keep SARS COV-2 at bay until a vaccine can be administered to all. The first instance to come to my attention was a paper by epidemiologist John Ioannidis, a professor of medicine at Stanford, particularly expert in bio-medical statistics. He warned of the “fiasco” that would result from introducing drastic measure in the absence of even the most elementary data, such as the infection mortality rate of the disease and the costs of immobilizing entire populations.[\[1\]](#)

What some of these costs might be was spelled out in a May 16th article in the British journal *The Spectator* by Ioannidis’s colleague, Jayanta Battacharya, writing with economist Mikko Packalen of Ontario’s Waterloo University.[\[2\]](#) Entitled “Lives v. Lives” it argued that the deaths that would be caused by lockdowns were likely to far outnumber the deaths averted. They projected, for example, a massive increase in child mortality due to loss of livelihood – an increase completely out of scale with the effects of the pandemic.

They also pointed out that lockdowns protect those already most able to protect themselves – those in comfortable situations for whom “working from home” is no more than a temporary inconvenience – and endanger those least able to protect themselves – the young, the poor and the economically marginal. By summer a stellar group of Canadian health professionals had recognized the same dangers as Battacharya and Packalen.[\[3\]](#) In their open letter to Canada’s political leaders, they pleaded for “a balanced response” to the pandemic, arguing that the “current approach” posed serious threats to both “population health” and “equity.” This group included two former Chief Public Health Officers for Canada, two former provincial public health chiefs, three former deputy ministers of health, three present or former deans of medicine at Canadian universities and various other academic luminaries – a virtual Who’s Who of public health in Canada. Nevertheless, their statement created barely a ripple in the media mainstream – an astonishing fact which I’ll return to presently.

This pattern has continued – most recently with the Great Barrington Declaration. This was a statement, issued on Oct. 6 by Martin Kulldorf, a professor of medicine at Harvard, Sunetra Gupta, a professor of theoretical epidemiology at Oxford, and Jay Battacharya of Sanford, whom I introduced a moment ago.[\[4\]](#) Their statement deplored “the devastating effects on...public health” of the present policy and advocated “focused protection” – a policy of protecting those at risk from COVID while allowing everyone else to go about their business. In this way, they reasoned, immunity could gradually build up in the healthy population, without endangering those who are particularly vulnerable to the disease.

A little while after the Great Barrington Declaration was put into circulation, an article by a British immunologist and respiratory pharmacologist, Mike Yeadon, provided reason for hope that there might already be much higher levels of immunity than is commonly supposed.[\[5\]](#)

Yeadon is a veteran of the drug industry where he directed research on new treatments for respiratory infection and eventually started his own biotech company. He argued that, even though SARS COV-2 was “novel,” it was still a coronavirus and, as such, substantially similar to other coronaviruses. By his estimate, up to 30% of people may have possessed “reactive T-cells” capable of fighting off SARS Cov-2 infections when the pandemic began. This is startling information, because it shows that the hypothesis from which all governments began – that all were equally vulnerable – was quite wrong.

In support of his theory Yeadon asserted that “multiple, top quality research groups around

the world”[\[6\]](#) had shown that such cross-immunities between coronaviruses are real and effective. His second move in this article was to try to establish how many people had been infected so far. This he did by reckoning backwards from the so-called Infection Fatality Rate (IFR), or the percentage of people who have had the disease who die from it. (If you know the percentage who have died you can derive from it the total number infected.) Here he relied on the work of John Ioannidis – he of the “fiasco” warning mentioned earlier – who had recently published in the *Bulletin* of the WHO a peer-reviewed meta-study – a study surveying other studies – in which he estimated the infection mortality rate of COVID-19, arriving at a median figure of .23%.[\[7\]](#) (This figure falls to .05% when deaths among those over seventy are excluded.). Applying Ioannidis’s estimates to the British population, Yeadon calculated that up to 30% of the British population had probably been infected. Combining his two numbers – those with prior immunity and those with immunity acquired during the pandemic, he concluded that herd immunity was probably in sight.

The positions taken by Yeadon and the Great Barrington epidemiologists have been echoed or anticipated by many other health professionals. On September 20, a group of nearly 400 Belgian doctors, supported by more than a thousand other health workers, published an open letter pleading for an end to “emergency” measures and calling for open public discussion. [\[8\]](#)

Ten days later more than twenty Ontario physicians sent a comparable letter to Ontario Premier Doug Ford. Whether all these people are “right” is not the question I want to raise here. Since only time will tell, and even when it does, probably not definitively, I don’t even think that’s the proper question.

Better questions might be: is what they’re saying plausible, is it well founded, is it worth discussing? Science supposedly works by a patient and painstaking process of eventually getting things right by first being willing to get them wrong and then comparing notes in the hope of finally arriving at a better account.

But what we have seen during this pandemic is something quite different: the strange spectacle of governments and established media trumpeting their attachment to science while, at the same time, marginalizing or excluding any scientific opinion not in agreement with their preferred policy.

This is striking in the case of the discussion, or lack of discussion, of *herd immunity* – a natural fact which has somehow been vilified as a heartless “strategy” recommended by those who don’t mind seeing a lot of their fellow citizens killed.[\[9\]](#) (In case this seems extreme I will provide evidence when I come to my discussion of media.).

This began in March when the British government were held to be following a policy of herd immunity and immediately shamed into introducing the same stringent lockdown imposed by all comparable countries, with the qualified exception of Sweden. (In the face of this shaming, the British government denied that it had ever had such a policy, so whether it did or not remains moot.) The same arguments have recently been brought to bear against the Great Barrington Declaration.” There was, for example, “the John Snow memorandum” in which a group of doctors denounced any “management strategy relying upon immunity from natural infections.” This memorandum haughtily declined to mention the Great Barrington Declaration by name, as if even mentioning would give it an undeserved dignity, but was clearly a response to it nonetheless.

Three points stand out for me in the positions of the Great Barrington signatories. The first, which they have all reiterated almost plaintively, is that what they are recommending was formerly, in Jay Battacharya's words, "standard public health practice."[\[10\]](#) The novelty is not in the idea that humanity must come to terms with a new virus; it's in the idea that this process of reaching what epidemiologists call "endemic equilibrium" can somehow be forestalled, postponed or avoided altogether.

This hope has been fostered by the rhetoric of war that has supported total mobilization against COVID-19 from the outset, and this rhetoric has in turn depended on public ignorance of elementary virology. (By this, I mean, roughly speaking, the sheer number of viruses to which we are exposed, the role viruses have played in our evolution, the role they continue to play within us, and the robustness of our defences against viral infections.). "So powerful and ancient are viruses," says Luis P. Villareal, the founding director of the Center for Virus Research at the Irvine campus of the University of California, "that I would summarize their role in life as 'Ex Virus Omnia' (from virus everything)."[\[11\]](#) Appreciation that what we are currently going through with a new virus is natural and, historically speaking, normal, might do a lot to take the air out of the frequently repeated and self-dramatizing claim that it is quite "unprecedented," "the greatest health care crisis in our history"[\[12\]](#) (Prime Minister Trudeau) etc.

The second point is that herd immunity is not a "strategy" but a condition. Whether it's reached by vaccination or by immunity acquired through natural exposure, it is the way in which we get along with viruses. The idea that this process can be extensively reshaped by what the John Snow memo writers call "management strategy" seems fanciful to the Great Barrington writers. It is at least debatable. It might be true that isolation works to "flatten the curve," and that masks reduce viral load and thus sometimes transform a sickness-inducing dose into a beneficial "innoculum." But one still has to ask what is gained and what is lost by these interventions and postponements. Can we really circumvent nature and maintain control without violating the Hippocratic maxim that when the way is not clear one should at least refrain from harm?

This brings up the third and decisive point: the definition of public health. Can this definition be confined to the prevention of a single disease, however much of a challenge it poses, or must it be conceived as taking in all the various determinants of health?

If the second definition be accepted, then I think a case can be made that the policy of total mobilization against COVID has been a catastrophe. Consider just a preliminary sketch of the consequences. There has been widespread and potentially fatal loss of livelihood throughout the world, especially amongst economically marginal groups. Businesses that have taken years to build have been destroyed. Suicide, depression, addiction and domestic violence have all increased. Public debt has swelled to potentially crippling proportions. The performing arts have been devastated. Precious "third places"[\[13\]](#) that sustain conviviality have closed. Fear has been sown between people. Homelessness has grown to the point where some downtown Toronto parks have begun to resemble the hobo camps of the 1930's.

There have been surges in other diseases that have gone untreated due to COVID preoccupation. Many formerly face-to-face interactions have been virtualized, and this change threatens, in many cases, to become permanent – it seems, for example, that "leading universities" like Harvard and U.C. Berkeley have enthusiastically adopted on-line teaching in the hopes of franchising their expertise in future. The list goes on. Is this a

worthwhile price to pay to avert illness amongst healthy people who could for the most part have sustained the illness? The question, by and large, has not even been asked. We don't even know how much illness has been averted by our draconian policies, and we probably never will, since the experiment of comparing a locked down population to a freely circulating one would be impossible to conduct. In the absence of such an experiment most discussion will founder on the elementary distinction between correlation and cause – that a lockdown was introduced and the disease abated does not prove that the lockdown was the cause of the abatement.

This is a glaring issue. The course of the epidemic in different countries is almost invariably ascribed to the policy followed by its government: Jacinda Ardern saved New Zealand, Donald Trump sank the United States, the scientifically minded Angela Merkel brought Germany through much more safely than bumbling Boris Johnson did in Great Britain, etc. This overlooks a huge amount that is not in the control of politicians – New Zealand is comprised of two remote islands; the United States suffers from epidemic obesity; populations differ in their habits, susceptibilities and even their genetic makeup. Anyone who tries to understand why they caught a cold when they got a cold and why on another occasion they didn't while someone else did will recognize an element of mystery, or at least obscurity. We don't know, and yet it currently seems obvious to everyone that a straight line can be drawn from policy to the pattern of COVID infections.

But the main question here is why there has been no discussion of the public health implications of the policy that has been followed.

I will try to answer this question as it touches on various institutions, notably media, but first I'll continue with my discussion of science. This word is, in my opinion, a source of fatal confusion. The basis of this confusion is that the term functions at the same time as a myth and as a description. Words possess denotations – the objects, real or imagined, at which they point – and connotations – the cloud of associations and feelings which they generate. The word science, in everyday talk, is all connotation and no denotation – the crucial attribute of those verbal puffballs that German scholar Uwe Pörksen calls “plastic words,” and Ivan Illich “amoeba words.”[\[14\]](#) It points to no agreed object – there are so-called hard sciences, and therefore, by inference, soft sciences, observational sciences and mathematical sciences, historical sciences and experimental sciences – and it possesses no agreed method. One often hears of “the scientific method” but even the most cursory survey of the philosophy of science will yield multiple competing accounts of what it might be. Because of this the word science, when its meaning is not further specified, functions as a collage of meanings whose rhetorical purpose is very often to induce nothing more than a radiating field of positive connotations. It is, in this respect, what French theorist Roland Barthes calls a myth.[\[15\]](#) Myths, according to Barthes, “naturalize” the phenomena they aggregate and summarize. In the case of science, a diverse, heterogeneous, and sometimes internally contradictory phenomenon is smoothed out and compressed into an apparent compact and consistent object which can be then made into a social protagonist and a grammatical subject: science says, science shows, science demands etc. An actual history, with all its twists and turns, has been replaced by what appears to be an unproblematic natural object – intelligible, obvious and at hand.

The result is that the myth obscures and absorbs the actual object(s). Actual sciences are limited and contingent, conditional and conditioned bodies of knowledge. These limits are of various kinds. Some are practical: evidence may be contradictory, insufficient, inaccessible, or impossible to obtain without exposing the subjects of the research to some

unacceptable harm. Some are limits in principle: ignorance expands with knowledge, reductive methods will necessarily fail to disclose the reality of the whole phenomena which they disassemble analytically, all scientific procedures rest on philosophical pre-suppositions which cannot themselves be put in question and so on.

During the last century, philosophers, historians and sociologists have undertaken many studies of what one of those philosophers, Bruno Latour, calls “science in action.”^[16] They have attempted, as historians Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have written, “to break down the aura of self-evidence surrounding the experimental way of producing knowledge.”^[17] Through this work a detailed picture has been built up of what is involved in producing and stabilizing scientific facts and then, as Latour says, “making them public.”^[18] I tried to give some idea of the range of these new images of the sciences in an epic 24-hour Ideas series called “How to Think About Science” that was broadcast in 2007 and 2008.^[19] That these images of the sciences are of a constrained and situated object in no way undermines or denies their precious achievement in building up bodies of knowledge that are based on public and contestable evidence.

A realistic image of the various sciences as they are actually practiced is a necessary foundation for political conversation. The myth of Science on the other hand is utterly corrosive of politics insofar as it supposes a body of immaculate and comprehensive knowledge that renders politics superfluous. I do not think this is an exaggeration. Again and again in the last year I have listened to political statements that present Science as a unified, imperative and infallible voice indicating an indisputable course of action.

The implication is that knowledge can replace judgment. But it cannot – because knowledge, as I have argued, is limited both in practice and in principle. Moral judgment is unavoidable, and is the proper domain of politics. To institute a lockdown which protects that part of the population able to shelter at home, while exposing another part to the harms that follow from lockdown, involves a political judgment. To disguise it as a scientific judgment is, in the first place, deceitful. At the time the decision was made no evidence whatsoever existed to support a policy of mass quarantine of a healthy population. Such a policy had never even been tried before and, even after the fact, is not really amenable to controlled study in any case. But more important was the moral abdication that was involved. Instead of an honest evaluation of the harms avoided and the harms induced, the public was told that Science had spoken, and the case was closed. The politicians and the media were then free to rend their garments and tremble in sympathy over all the harm the virus had done without ever having to admit that much of this damage was politically induced. Where there was no science, the myth of Science became a screen and a shield behind which politicians could shelter themselves from the consequences of decisions they could deny ever having made.

It is fair to say, I think, that the various sciences that are involved in the continuing catastrophe of COVID-19 are deeply divided. Their voices have not generally been heard, but many hundreds of medical doctors, epidemiologists, virologists and former public health officials have spoken against a policy of indiscriminate quarantine. It’s quite possible that many thousands more share their opinion and might have said so had the onset of the virus been met by a discussion rather than a stampede.

It is after all true, as Jay Battacharya says, that what these scientists have recommended – “a balanced response” rather than a utopian pursuit of total control – was once “standard public health practice.” But so far almost no hint of scientific dissensus has appeared in the

Canadian media I have followed like the CBC and the *Globe and Mail*. What are the consequences? Some warn that “trust in science” will be impaired. This is the fear expressed by four medical scientists writing recently in *The National Post* on the need for what they call “healthy discussions.”[\[20\]](#) But in the end these writers only want to foster freer expression in order to protect the authority of a unified subject called “science” which depends, in the last analysis, on trust rather than argument.

The phrase is telling because it doesn’t speak of knowledgeable assent to the findings of a particular science – for this no trust is necessary – but rather of a general disposition to believe whatever carries the imprimatur of some scientific institution and is authorized to appear in its livery. Science, in this sense, resembles Plato’s “noble lie” – a fable told by the wise to prevent credulous citizens from falling prey to inferior myths.[\[21\]](#)

It is my belief that trust in a Science that stand above the social fray – immaculate, oracular, disinterested – is already fatally eroded – both by several generations of patient study of what the sciences actually do and actually know, and by the dogmatism of the noble liars who have driven unanswered skeptics into the desperate straits of conspiracy theory (more on that in a moment). I would like to plead for a new picture in which a mystified Science is replaced by diverse sciences, dissensus is recognized as normal, limits to knowledge are admitted as being in the nature of things, not a temporary always about-to-be-overcome embarrassment, and the rough and ready moral judgments that are the proper stuff of politics are flushed out of the cover currently provided for them by Science-as-myth. It has been my view for a long time that only after the myth of Science is overcome will we be able to see what the sciences are and escape the spell of what they are not. Unhappily one of the revelations of the pandemic seems to be that this myth is entrenching itself ever more deeply in our social imagination.

ON THE NEED FOR POLITICAL REALIGNMENT

A figure of great pathos for me during the most recent phase of the pandemic has been the theoretical epidemiologist Sunetra Gupta, a professor at Oxford, the recipient of several prestigious awards for her scientific achievements, and one of the authors of the Great Barrington declaration.

In her writings and statements she has consistently made three crucial points bearing on public policy:

- 1) “lockdowns only delay the inevitable spread of the virus”
- 2) “lockdown is a luxury of the affluent; something that can be afforded only in wealthy countries — and even then, only by the better-off households in those countries” and
- 3) that, under lockdown, “the poorest and most vulnerable people” will inevitably be made “to bear the brunt of the fight against coronavirus” with “the working class and younger members of society...carry[ing] the heaviest burden.”[\[22\]](#)

She has publicized these ideas, expecting, in her words, “debate and disagreement” and “welcoming” such disagreement insofar as that is how, in her understanding, “science progresses.”

Early in the pandemic she also hoped, as someone who identified with the political left and had “strong views about the distribution of wealth [and] about the importance of the

Welfare State,” that others so identified could be brought to see that lockdowns were aggravating existing social inequalities as well as generating new ones. Neither her hopes nor her expectations have been fulfilled. In place of debate, the Great Barrington statement has generated, again in her words, “insults, personal criticism, intimidation and threats” – an “onslaught,” she writes, “of vitriol and hostility” from “journalists and academics,” as well as the public at large for which she was “utterly unprepared” and by which she has been “horried.” And all this for enunciating what she and her colleagues understood was formerly “standard public health practice” – that phrase of Jay Battacharya’s that I keep repeating because I find it so evocative of the seemingly unnoticed novelty of the present moment.

Perhaps most striking of all, the Great Barrington Declaration was made in a handsome, converted mansion in bucolic Western Massachusetts, the home of the American Institute for Economic Research, an institute founded on a vision of a society of “pure freedom and private governance” in which “the role of government is sharply confined” and “individuals can flourish within a truly free market and a free society” – a view commonly called libertarian.^[23] This was a rather discordant setting for Sunetra Gupta, avowedly “Left-wing” and a proponent of “the need for publicly owned utilities and government investment in nationalised industries.” Among other things it allowed her opponents to associate her with “climate change denial” (though that is, in fact, something of a caricature of the AIER’s actual position which questions climate policy more than denying climate change as such.) But more important for me is the transposition of what, for Gupta, ought to have been a left-wing position into a right-wing position. What this illustrates, I think, is just how inept, deceptive and confining these antique political descriptions have become.

The terms left and right originated in the French National Assembly of 1789 when the friends of the revolution sat to the left of the chair and the supporters of the king to the right. Over time they evolved into signifiers of the balance of power between state and market according to which predominated as an allocator of resources and locus of social decision-making. Today they are verbal straitjackets and fetters on social imagination. Like the legendary Procrustes who chopped or stretched his guests in order to adapt them to the bed he had available, they distort our circumstances more than describe them. The pandemic has made this plain. It is demonstrable that lockdown and economic shut-down have been applied at the expense of those least able to protect themselves. Some former fat cats have suffered too, of course – airlines, travel companies and the like have been decimated across the board – but it is generally true that the poorer and weaker have paid a heavier price than the stronger and more well-to-do. Grocery clerks have stayed at work, while civil servants have worked from home; the working class have lost jobs while most professional employment has continued; small businesses have failed, while big businesses have held on; the economically marginal have been driven to addiction, homelessness and suicide while the well-heeled and well-housed have suffered little more than an excess of one another’s company. Since the left ostensibly speaks for the less-advantaged, one might have expected anti-lockdown to become a left-wing issue but the case has been quite dramatically the reverse. Criticism has come almost exclusively from the right with only the bravest of leftists, like Sunetra Gupta, daring to cross the aisle.

Throughout the pandemic both political decision-makers and mainstream media have treated criticism of the policy of mass quarantine as either beneath mention or outside the bounds of rational discussion.

When demonstrators in small numbers began to gather outside the Ontario legislature back

in the spring, the province's Premier dismissed them as "yahoos." Even though a man of the populist right himself, Premier Doug Ford wanted everyone to know that these were not fellow-citizens but sub-humans – the original yahoos in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* were "brutes in human form" – whose opinions need not be recognized or taken into account. This abuse has continued.

When the "second wave" began, critics pointed out, first, that the number of "cases" being recorded might be related to the number of tests being done; second, that positive tests were not actually "cases" in the sense of sick people; and third, that mortality had remained dramatically lower than in the spring, even as these "cases" had surged. These criticisms were quickly stigmatized by *the Globe and Mail's* André Picard.

The claim that the second wave was mainly a "case-demic," he wrote, was the work of "conspiracy theorists and 'fake-news' chanters."[\[24\]](#) Again the implication was that people like me, who had been struck by precisely these three features of the second wave, belonged to a class whose views were the result of some pathology, malice or social defect and needn't be considered. This mixture of condescension and contempt was later extended to the Great Barrington Declaration. *The Globe and Mail* did not, in fact, deign to notice the declaration as a news item. Since the paper had stated in its editorial columns that "Canada is at war,"[\[25\]](#) they were presumably under no obligation to report such treasonable views. Nevertheless, André Picard on Nov. 9th wrote about it in a vein that suggested that he thought his readers would know about it and would certainly share his distaste for it. The Great Barrington Declaration is entirely couched in terms of public health – building immunity amongst those at low risk while protecting those at high risk, it argues, will achieve the best and "most compassionate" balance of harms under the current circumstances – but, in Picard's rendering it becomes incomprehensibly cruel and obtuse. "What the Great Barrington Declaration says," he writes, "when you got through the pomposity, is that profits matter more than people, that we should let the coronavirus run wild, and, if the vulnerable die in service of economic growth, so be it."[\[26\]](#) This is an astonishing misrepresentation – the more so as it directed against a sober and considered proposal from eminent and qualified scientists by a man who explicitly portrays himself as a friend and defender of threatened "science." What I want to emphasize here, besides its inaccuracy, is its sheer belligerence and incivility – as if opposing views had only to be mocked not argued with. Where in all this rage can a civil voice like Sunetra Gupta's hold a plea?

I see two great problems here. The first is the violent reciprocity that turns left and right into warring factions and confines each one ever more tightly in its proper box. What the enemy says is wrong – entirely and a priori – simply because the enemy has said it. Let me take an example. For some years the media have been building up a laughingstock called the "anti-vaxxer." This is not a person who questions some element or aspect of mass vaccination on some rational ground – those who hold the correct opinion deny in advance and on principle that there can even be such questions or such grounds – it is rather a social enemy, someone whom you know by definition to be unpardonably ignorant, selfish and irresponsible, and whose arguments you can therefore disregard. Having created this scarecrow, it then becomes quite easy to assimilate to it a new bogeyman called the "anti-masker." Now you have an instant characterization for all who may question the policy of lockdown. In actual fact the question of masks is scientifically quite murky. Until last spring both the W.H.O and Canada's chief medical officer, Teresa Tam held that they were of no utility in blocking an infectious agent as miniscule and as wily as a coronavirus. On April

20th of this year, the Ontario Civil Liberties Association released a study by retired physicist Denis G. Rancourt, in which he reviewed the scientific literature on masks and concluded bluntly that “masks don’t work.” “There have been extensive randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies, and meta-analysis reviews of RCT studies,” he wrote in his abstract of this article, “which all show that masks and respirators do not work to prevent respiratory influenza-like illnesses, or respiratory illnesses believed to be transmitted by droplets and aerosol particles.”^[27] Some contrary observational studies (i.e. without controls) have been presented since, and ingenious suggestions made that masks, by reducing viral load, may deliver what amounts to an inoculation dose and thus serve as a sort of proto-vaccine, but one can still say that the science is, at best, ambiguous and that most of the studies touting good effects like reduced viral load have paid no attention to potential ill effects – where do the viruses hypothetically blocked by your mask then go, etc.? The only randomized controlled trial made during the pandemic that I know of took place in Denmark in the spring. With more than 3,000 participants, it found no statistically significant difference in how many contracted COVID between those who wore masks and those who didn’t.^[28] Here one almost has to pinch oneself when contemplating the degree to which ritualism and superstition can be disguised as science. Rancourt’s survey, and the more recent Danish study, if not definitive, should at least weigh heavily in public discussion, but instead the “anti-masker” has become the very epitome of the anti-social, anti-scientific rube. I do not intend here to speak against ritual – people were so badly panicked by the first phase of the pandemic, and made so afraid of one another, that some ritualization of that fear, like masking, was probably necessary if there was to be a return even to semi-normal social interaction. I’m only objecting to ritual behaviours being disguised as scientific mandates and then made a basis for ostracization and legal censure.

This is the first problem: making judgments whose only grounds are the dynamic of enmity: the enemy of my enemy is my friend, whatever the enemy says or thinks is wrong, and so forth. On this basis, once Donald Trump has said that the cure for COVID shouldn’t be worse than the disease, as he did last spring, then this thought becomes unthinkable and unspeakable by his opponents simply because Donald Trump has said it. This inability to think the enemy’s thoughts is fatal to sound reasoning. That the cure must not be worse than the disease is a principle that goes back to Hippocrates and remains true even in the mouth of a scoundrel. Reflexive polarization creates false dichotomies, cleaving opposites that should be held together into warring half-truths. The second problem that I want to highlight is the inadequacy of the left-right political map on which battle lines are currently being drawn. The difficulty lies in what is omitted when all political decisions are plotted on a single axis running from state to market, public to private provision, administrative control to the “pure freedom” espoused by Sunetra Gupta’s erstwhile host, the American Institute for Economic Research. The first thing that is ignored is scale. This theme was introduced into contemporary political thought by the Austrian writer Leopold Kohr in his 1956 book *The Breakdown of Nations*. “Behind all forms of social misery,” Kohr wrote, there is “one cause...: bigness.” “Whenever something is wrong something is too big.”^[29] With this book, Kohr founded a new school of political ecology that his student and successor Ivan Illich called “social morphology.”^[30] British biologists D’arcy Wentworth Thompson and J.B.S. Haldane had studied the close fit between form and size in nature and concluded that natural forms are viable only at the appropriate scale i.e. a hawk’s form would not be viable at the scale of a sparrow, or a mouse’s at the scale of an elephant.^[31] Kohr was the first to argue that social form and size show the same correlation. E.F. Schumacher, another student of Kohr’s, would later popularize the argument in his *Small is Beautiful*. Illich also developed and extended Kohr’s crucial idea in his book *Tools for Conviviality*.

Why does scale matter in the present case? Under cover of restricting the spread of COVID, emergency administrative regulation and control is being extended into areas normally outside the purview of the state – friendship, family life, religious worship, sexual relations etc. (One Toronto city councilor, in her newsletter to her constituents, recommended masturbation, under the slogan “you are your safest partner.”[\[32\]](#)). In the past, prerogatives justified by war have often been retained even after peace has been restored, and it seems prudent to assume that elements of the current regime will outlast the present emergency. One can already see the emerging outline of what one might call, on the model of the National Security State, a new Health Security State. The modern image of a social body comprised of individual citizens associating freely with one another is being replaced by the image of a giant immune system in which each is obliged to the whole according to principles of risk and overall system integrity – an assembly of “lives” comprising ultimately one overarching Life. In the name of this new social body, any obligation whatsoever can potentially be interrupted and proscribed. The most shocking and telling example for me is the way in which the dying have been left alone – unaccompanied, untouched unconsolated. But this is not an issue on which the left-right diagram sheds any light whatever. The answer to such a state is not a market in which private rather than public actors keep us penned in protective isolation from one another. The issue is one of scale – the prerogatives of friendship, affinity, and mutual aid v. the imperatives of system health – and of culture – are we to be allowed other gods than Health?

A second issue that fails to compute in the prevailing left-right scheme is conviviality or liveability. This quality depends heavily on what American writer Ray Oldenburg calls “third places” – places whose character is neither public nor private but an amalgam of both.[\[33\]](#) These places get left out of the account when public health is pitted against “the economy” and criticism of lockdowns – as in the statement I quoted earlier from André Picard – is equated with a willingness to sacrifice “the vulnerable in the service of economic growth.” The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker all contribute their mite to G.N.P. alongside Amazon and General Motors, but they don’t really belong to the same world. Money may change hands, but many of the small enterprises that make localities habitable, hospitable and vivid belong more to the world of subsistence than to the grow-or-die world of The Economy. The performing arts also belong in this category. This whole dimension has been badly and, often enough, fatally injured during the pandemic. Undertakings patiently built up and patiently built into communities over many years are failing. At times, conviviality itself has been given a bad name, as it is in caricatures of the reckless young, endangering their elders by getting too close to one another. But none of this really registers on a spectrum on which the masked left is pitted against the unmasked right, conviviality is conflated with “economic growth,” and civil liberty is consigned to the care of armed militias menacing American state legislatures.

What this points to – its “revelation” in terms of my theme – is the desperate need for political realignment. Left and right are very old wineskins that are exploding all around us as they are made to try and contain some very new wine.[\[34\]](#) Sunetra Gupta finds a platform only among libertarians who conflate freedom with free markets because there is no ground on the left for a position that punctures the dream-world of total safety and total control. The libertarians for their part affirm the indifferent operations of free markets as the only foundation for economic justice because they see a tyrannical state as the only alternative. The religious are driven to the right because the left sees religious duty as no more than a revocable privilege granted by that “mortal god,” the state.[\[35\]](#) The friends of the common good are driven to the left because they see nothing on the right but idolatry of

the monstrous machinery of the market. They defend lockdowns as “care” while overlooking the collateral damage that care can do when it acts at the scale of mass quarantine. The right acknowledges the damage but can only enunciate a competing view of care in terms that reinforce an economic system that is rapidly chewing up the entire biosphere. Mightn’t it be time to talk?

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Earlier I noted *Globe and Mail* health columnist André Picard’s willingness to condemn anyone who questioned a policy founded on “cases” (which are often – no one knows how often – not cases of illness but merely positive test results) as a “conspiracy theorist.” Fed by the shadowy figure of QAnon, this has become a frequent term of abuse directed at those who have been unwilling to accept the idea that a victory over COVID is worth the ruin it may produce. The epithet is so convenient and so mystifying that I think it’s worth exploring a little what is meant by it and what it may be hiding.

Let me begin with a story. Some years ago, in the long aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon, a CBC colleague and friend came to me with a request. Would I support his proposal, he asked, to do a series of broadcasts on *Ideas*, where I was then a producer, about what was wrong with the official account of the attacks. This account had been submitted in August of 2004 by the official inquiry, the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States (the 9/11 Commission for short). This colleague then issued a challenge: that before deciding I should at least read David Ray Griffin’s 2004 book *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions About the Bush Administration and 9/11*. Griffin, as I was to learn, was a distinguished professor of philosophy at the Claremont School of Theology in southern California, a hotbed in my mind of “process theology,” rather than conspiracy theory. (Process theology, of which Griffin is as an exponent – he co-founded, with John Cobb, The Center for Process Studies at Claremont – is a school of theology that was inspired by the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead.) Intrigued, I complied with my colleague’s request and was impressed and disconcerted by Griffin’s temperate, well-argued and well-documented book. At that point there was no chance that *Ideas* was going to approve my colleague’s proposal, since Griffin’s book, despite its author’s academic *bona fides*, still carried the full odium attaching to “conspiracy theories” in respectable journalistic precincts. But I got interested nonetheless. Up to that time, I had never taken the slightest interest in such theories, assuming them to be an obsession of cranks, but I was surprised to learn from Griffin that, in the similar case of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 – surprise attack serving as a wished-for *casus belli* – respectable historians had produced evidence that the U.S. sustained an attack it could have foreseen (and perhaps did foresee) in order to stir its population to war. (I don’t mean that this is a widely accepted idea or that it has been convincingly demonstrated, just that some evidence along these lines has been admitted over time into the historical record. See, for example, John Toland, *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, Doubleday, 1982)

I decided to conduct a little informal research, using the case of the assassination of John Kennedy in 1963 and the official account of it that was given by the Warren Commission the following year. Whenever I found an opportunity, I asked people I was talking with whether they accepted the Warren Report as the truth about Kennedy’s murder. The results were another surprise: amongst those who had an opinion, I couldn’t find a single soul who didn’t think that the Warren Commission had overlooked or concealed some or all of the truth about what happened in Dallas in November of 1963. Another striking case was the TV

series “The Valour and the Horror” broadcast on the CBC in 1992. This series, in an episode called “Death by Moonlight,” made the claim that Allied air forces had knowingly committed atrocities against civilian populations as part of the bombing of Germany during the Second World War. Older relatives of mine had participated in the air war, and I was swept up in the furor that followed the broadcast. Here the issue was partly about what people actually knew at the time and partly about how the “strategic bombing” of German cities was to be framed fifty years later. It wasn’t news that German civilians had been incinerated in deliberately-set fire storms in Hamburg, Dresden and other cities. What was at issue was whether this could be faced as a crime or should remain protectively wrapped in the heroic narrative of necessity bravely borne in the defense of freedom.

What we can see and what we can say about the past varies with historical distance and with the intensity of the commitments with which we view it. It becomes easier with time to face the conspiratorial dimension in political decisions – that a few privately decide and many suffer in the execution of their decisions. How does this lengthy prologue relate to the pandemic? Well it seems to me that once the name of *conspiracy theorist* becomes a handy and liberally applied insult, as we saw earlier in the case of André Picard, a certain mystification is right around the corner. Ruling out conspiracy a priori is as fatal to unprejudiced investigation as assuming it. Take the strange case of Event 201, the pandemic planning exercise staged last October, on the very brink of the pandemic, by a partnership consisting of the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins, the World Economic Forum, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This was, according to the organizers, a “tabletop exercise that simulated a series of dramatic, scenario-based facilitated discussions, confronting difficult, true-to-life dilemmas associated with response to a hypothetical, but scientifically plausible, pandemic”[\[36\]](#) During these discussions, many of the features of the pandemic that followed were quite accurately foreseen. According to the documentary *Plandemic* this was because the pandemic was foreseen and planned by a cabal of vaccine manufactures and vaccine promoters with Bill Gates as villain in chief.[\[37\]](#) This documentary shows many of the characteristics you would find in a textbook description of conspiracy theory: partial and ambiguous evidence is forced into neat, pre-conceived patterns; sinister motives are ascribed to the alleged plotters; a wised-up disregard is shown for competing explanations etc. Easy then to dismiss the film’s whole argument, and, in the process, to overlook what is uncanny about Event 201 predicting the pandemic so precisely. One doesn’t have to believe in conspiracy to see that many of the narratives that have guided SARS COV-2 policy were written in advance, or that the events of recent months have long been anticipated and planned for – Event 201, for example, was preceded by three earlier “exercises” going back to “Atlantic Storm” in 2005.[\[38\]](#) Events often fall into the shapes we have prepared for them, planned for them, dreamed for them. 9/11 may not have been an inside job, as David Ray Griffin claimed, but it was certainly the opportunity that the Bush administration, barely legitimate after its contested election, had been waiting for, and it wasted no time thereafter in initiating its catastrophic War on Terror. In the same way, the war on the virus, and the many experiments in social control it has empowered, seem to be thought forms long prepared and just waiting for their occasion.

My point here is similar here to my point earlier about political enmity and polarization destroying all ground for discussion. How many are called conspiracy theorists when they just want to ask a question, how many others are driven to real conspiracy theories when their questions are not answered or acknowledged? Awareness of this problem began for me with the figure I mentioned earlier of the “anti-vaxxer,” a belittling name that seemed to

establish itself in public discussion almost overnight a few years back. It affected me because I had been reflecting on the question of vaccination for many years without being able to come to a firm conclusion – I was quizzical rather than pro or anti, a position that had been summarily driven from the field with the invention of the anti-vaxxer. My questions began when my infant son contracted a frightening, potentially fatal (but, in this case, happily not) cerebral meningitis at the age of eight months following his MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination. My wife and I subsequently heard of other such cases. Anecdotal evidence, yes, but I began to wonder – could you really prove the connection, should there be one? Children and adolescents who follow recommended schedules receive up to sixteen different vaccines, many of which are boosted several times. Can anyone really say with certainty that they know all the effects or how they interact or how they are expressed? It should not be controversial to observe that this is a fairly massive attempt to supplement and manipulate the workings of the immune system. Is it impossible that the plague of allergies and auto-immune diseases that seem to characterize our time is related, as some suppose, to this systematic interference? Might we be better off with less vaccines, while still recognizing that some have been invaluable?

To even begin to answer such questions it is necessary to recognize, first of all, that they have a philosophical, as well as an empirical dimension. There are limits to knowledge in the study of complex systems, but these are often denied in the effort to foster the “trust in science” I wrote about above. These limits to knowledge must be acknowledged, as must the consequent limits on what can be imposed on people in the name of science. Within that framework it may then be possible to shed some light on the empirical side of the questions I’ve raised. But the omens in this respect are not good. Let me take a couple of examples. In 2016 a documentary film appeared called “Vaxxed: From Coverup to Catastrophe.” It claimed that during the course of a CDC (Centers for Disease Control) study into a possible link between autism and the administration of MMR vaccine to infants, documents were destroyed and data fudged in order to make emerging evidence of such a link disappear. This claim was made by one of the scientists involved, William Thompson, in recorded phone conversations with environmental biologist Brian Hooker. Thompson’s report could be false, or in some way manipulated, but, on its face, it is impressive and ought to have, at the least, led to wide public discussion. What has happened instead is that the film has been effectively suppressed. This began when Robert de Niro, under pressure, cancelled a scheduled screening at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2016. The film has since disappeared from the internet and is available only by purchase from the filmmakers’ web-site.[\[39\]](#) The Wikipedia biographies of all the principals in the film show evidence of malicious editing with recurring references to fraud, false information, discredited views and the like. This does not give the impression of a fair, frank or open discussion but of a ruthless orthodoxy which ostracizes all dissent.

A second example: I have read countless times that British doctor Andrew Wakefield is the author of a fraudulent study, first published in *The Lancet* then withdrawn, purporting to show a link between autism and the MMR vaccine. Such repetition generally produces assent – if everybody believes it, it must be true – and I had unthinkingly accepted this claim until one day an old friend asked me if I had ever seen the discredited study. No. Might she send it to me? Yes, of course. I read it and found that Wakefield was only one of thirteen authors of this rather technical paper, and that it reached no definite conclusion beyond asserting that the enterocolitis which the authors investigated in twelve young children “may be related to neuropsychiatric dysfunction” and that “in most cases, onset of symptoms was after measles, mumps, and rubella immunisation.” The paper ends with a

call for “further investigations.”[\[40\]](#) This mild and rather tentative conclusion was the famous fraud? I was astonished. Further research revealed that Wakefield had gone beyond what the paper asserts in his public statements but only so far as to say that he was sufficiently worried by the suspected link that he recommended disaggregating the triple vaccine and vaccinating separately for each disease with a year’s interval between shots. This was the extent to which he was “anti-vax.” Nevertheless he was barred from medical practice – “stricken from the medical register” – and his name blackened around the world.

There’s a lot of territory between the claim that the SARS COV-2 pandemic was a planned event whose viral protagonist was created in a laboratory in Washington or Wuhan, and the claim that vaccine manufacturers and their philanthropic friends in the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation are innocent altruists selflessly dedicated to a disease-free world. But discussion tends to get pushed to extremes. Conspiracy is one of the bogies that keeps it polarized in this way. As with my initial examples of Pearl Harbor, the strategic bombing of German cities, the Kennedy assassination, and 9/11, it’s quite possible that stories that can’t be told now will become more believable with time. Perhaps powerful vaccine manufactures did conspire with British medical authorities to discredit Andrew Wakefield and cut short his research. I’m sure I don’t know. Nor do many others who think they do. Perhaps, to complicate the issue further, public confidence in vaccination is so precious and so easily shaken, that slander and persecution of the occasional vaccine safety heretic is a small price to pay for it. After all, Socrates ascribes nobility to the “noble lie” and the “opportune falsehood” for a very well-argued reason. My conviction, as I’ve said, is that the lustre of “the guardians” – Plato’s name for those who in our time would advocate “trust in science” – is now impossible to restore. Our only hope therefore lies in an open, pacified and demystified discussion. What prospect of that? Am I not simply reiterating Socrates’ impossible dream that philosophers will become kings, or kings philosophers – the only conditions, he says, under which there can be a “cessation of troubles.”[\[41\]](#) One might as well hope that that meek will inherit the earth. [\[42\]](#) Only the extremity of our circumstances – humanly, politically, ecologically – makes it seem possible.

PROTECTING OUR HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The pandemic has no stranger figure of speech than this one, and yet it seems to clang ironically on very few ears. We are in a “health crisis,” the worse in our history according to our prime minister.[\[43\]](#) At such a moment one might hope that a health care system which absorbs nearly half the provincial budget in Ontario would mobilize to protect us – instead we are asked to protect it. That our health institutions should not be overtaxed, overstressed, over-whelmed, pushed to a “tipping point,” etc. has been one of the prime objectives of public policy from Day One of the pandemic. And, from the beginning, it has been generally accepted as a reasonable objective. That sickness should threaten the institution that is ostensibly there to deal with sickness is remarkable, I think, and constitutes yet another of the pandemic’s revelations. How can this be?

Our health care system is not, in fact, a system of care, presuming that there could even be such a thing as a “system” of care. It is a giant bureaucracy set up to administer certain health interventions at its own convenience. That many of these interventions are ingenious, life-changing, and capably administered does not change this impersonal and industrial character. (Emergency departments are something of an exception here, and I’d like to record my gratitude for the skillful and timely repairs I have sometimes received in various emergency rooms.) This means that hospital-based medicine has not been designed to deal with an emergency of the kind we are experiencing.

In the event, there seems to have been surprisingly little overtaxing of hospitals during the pandemic. Hospitals in New York, Montreal, and Milano certainly experienced short, well-publicized periods of strain in the spring, but in many other places the opposite occurred. In Toronto, for example, people were so effectively warned off hospitals, that hospital worker friends told me stories of empty beds and under-employed staff. Meanwhile, the grateful public outside the fortress walls were beating pots and pans and bringing pizza to hospitals in a show of support for their health-care “heroes” or “champions.” Almost all other treatments and services not connected to COVID were drastically curtailed. It is quite likely that the adverse consequences of these foregone diagnoses with treatments will, over time, quite outstrip the damage done by the virus.

A further question is whether hospitals, except in rare cases, are the best place for people suffering from the illness induced by this new coronavirus. One thinks here of the panic about ventilators that took place in March and April. Would we have enough? Auto parts manufacturers in Ontario undertook to supply 10,000 ventilators;[\[44\]](#) an electronics manufacturer promised 10,000 more.[\[45\]](#) Then it began to emerge that ventilators might be actively dangerous to COVID patients, and that intensive care units might sometimes be using them to protect themselves from infection rather than in the best interests of patients.[\[46\]](#) One wonders if this story will ever be fully told. There has been a lot of talk about how treatment for COVID has improved – in Britain just 26% of Covid-19 patients were placed on ventilation after admission to intensive care in September compared with up to 76% at the height of the pandemic [\[47\]](#) – but not so much about how much harm may have been done during the experimental phase. The CBC Radio program *Now or Never*, for example, recently reported on a 73-year old man who spent 104 days on a respirator and is now an invalid who requires full-time care by his 29-year old daughter. The broadcast focused on the daughter’s heroic charity, and the challenges it poses, not on whether the father’s treatment had been prudent.

Sick people need care. In hospitals COVID sufferers are isolated from all those who actually want to care for them because fear of the disease and its potential spread has overcome all other obligations. Might more have been cared for at home? The answer is probably yes, had the health care system been able or willing to reorganize itself in the interests of its patients. Instead doctors’ offices largely shut their doors, appointments for other ailments were cancelled, and the hospitals pulled up their drawbridges. The health care system protected itself.

THE MEDIA

It’s been more than forty years since I was persuaded by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in their exemplary two-volume work *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, that an ostensibly free media can still function as a propaganda system – that there can be, as they say in their book, “brainwashing under freedom.”[\[48\]](#) Media at all times are biased – by their own structure, as Harold Innis and his successors showed, and by the social, political and economic environments in which they operate. Fairy tales about a golden past, invented only to thrash a decadent present, are not a sound starting point for critique. And yet, even so, it seems to me that the media to which I have been exposed during the pandemic have risen to new heights of cheer-leading and uncritical “messaging.”

It is in the nature of news media to disguise and dissimulate their own influence on what they report. News is not news, they insist, just because the news media make it news – it is already news as a result of some inherent quality that the news media only recognize and

reproduce. This is partly true of course. The news media do adapt to popular psychology, to established taste, and to pre-scripted narrative forms, more than they invent them. But the media also innovate – drawing attention to particular facts and reinforcing particular narratives while disregarding others. And, in the case of the pandemic – a novel phenomenon that might initially have allowed various constructions – their leading role has been striking. This began the day that the W.H.O announced that the spread of COVID-19 should be considered a pandemic. Blanket coverage began, implying that there was now nothing else of note happening in the world. A sense of precariousness and foreboding was generated. Everything was “unprecedented.” “A new normal” seemed to fall from the sky almost overnight. A state of emergency and exception was declared. War metaphors were rife. When the *Globe and Mail* stated explicitly on Sept 21, in an editorial I cited earlier, that “Canada is at war” it was only spelling out the position taken by major news media from the beginning. Numbers were spun for maximum effect. Particularly egregious during the second wave has been the constant trumpeting of “cases,” meaning positive test results, with little interest shown in how many are actually sick, how the number of cases might relate to the number of tests, how reliable the tests are etc.

This emphasis on whatever was most alarming helped to stampede a large part of the population into a state of panicked fear that had little to do with the actual dangers facing them. It also severely constrained political choice. Politicians were praised for their leadership when they made strict rules and spanked for their laxity when they revoked them. A myth was promulgated that “we are,” as another *Globe and Mail* editorial put it, “the masters of our pandemic fate.”[\[49\]](#) Here the idea is that everything that happens is produced by policy – there is nothing that must be simply suffered because attempting to counteract it would only induce worse harms – every COVID infection accuses a political leadership that, as the same *Globe* editorial says, “should be doing more.” Lurking in the background is the long-gestated idea of zero tolerance, now translated into “Covid-zero” and other fantasies of total suppression of the virus.[\[50\]](#) (I am not denying here that some places – whether because of their size, their situation or the heavy-handed intensity of their regimes, like Melbourne’s 100-day lockdown inside “a ring of steel”[\[51\]](#) – have achieved low numbers. The question is, for how long and at what cost?)

War imposes uniformity of opinion, and that has been particularly evident with the CBC and *The Globe and Mail*. Some dissent has begun to creep in to the more conservative papers, the *National Post* and the *Sun*, but both the *Globe* and the CBC seem to conceive their role not as platforms for discussion but as guardians of correct thought. The listeners and readers are to be encouraged, edified, occasionally chastised for incipient “complacency,”[\[52\]](#) but at all times treated as unified and homogeneous mass – all in this together, all sharing the same sentimental regard for our health care champions etc. What this has meant, I think, is that an elite consensus, fortified by the elemental power of mythic tropes like war, solidarity in crisis, loyalty, heroism, and sacrifice, has imposed itself on the public. The result has been that two crucial realities have been hidden, overlooked or suppressed. The first is the scientific dissensus I spoke of earlier. The second is the residual popular common sense that instinctively prefers mutual aid and muddling through to centralized bureaucratic control. I realize that common sense is a tricky term, regularly coopted by right-wing populism, as it was in Ontario in the mid-1990’s when the Conservative government of Mike Harris dressed up neo-liberal *laissez-faire* and municipal “amalgamation” as a “common sense revolution.” But this apparent tendency of populism to skew to the right precisely illustrates the difficulty we are in. Many historians, anthropologists and political theorists, in our time, have tried to describe forms of resistance

to the state that do not terminate in an even more oppressive state, like Ontario's "common sense revolution," or a hundred other variants from fascism to Peronism to Trumpism. E.P. Thompson wrote of "the moral economy of the crowd"; James C. Scott has described various forms of ethnic and agrarian resistance; Christopher Lasch portrayed American populism as a defense of the moral and religious integrity of community life against elite and "meritocratic" disruption; and Ivan Illich tried to mark out a "vernacular" sphere in which both state and market are kept at bay.[\[53\]](#) But these forms of populism remain largely unrecognized in the journalistic discourse I have been talking about. The result is that populism is forced to the right and its dignity denied. The outright contempt that is regularly expressed for Trump voters – Hilary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" – illustrates this dynamic.

To be concrete, resistance to lockdown, masking and curbs on the right of assembly has steadily grown in Ontario, beginning with the demonstrators who began to gather at the legislature in the spring – the people, as I remarked earlier, that the Premier categorized as "yahoos." This fall, in Toronto, several thousand people gathered in Dundas Square. The breadth of the coalition that made up this crowd is hard to judge but civil liberty, religious freedom and ruined livelihoods seemed to be the main issues animating them. Remarkably, given the size of this demonstration, it was given, so far as I know, no coverage whatsoever beyond a brief mention as a traffic issue – Yonge St. was blocked – on the news channel CP24. This appears to be nothing less than censorship – who needs to know what the yahoos are up to? It certainly invites the nemesis I spoke of earlier – in which dissent deprived of a voice and a forum is driven into the more violent and destructive paths of political reaction.

Equally worrying is the failure to register or report the true variety of opinions amongst doctors, medical scientists and public health specialists – remember how many medical and public health luminaries were among the signers of last summer's disregarded call for a "balanced approach" to the pandemic.

This does two things. First, it reinforces the obsolete image I criticized above of science as a singular and unanimous voice, standing above politics, capable of authoritatively settling all disputes, and requiring that the citizenry possesses an unquestioning "trust." Second it casts media as guardians or shepherds of public opinion with a duty to withhold from a vulnerable and credulous public disturbing news about anti-lockdown protests, dissident epidemiologists or the actual science regarding the efficacy of masks. (This presumes of course that the bellwethers of public opinion are attentive enough to know these things themselves rather than being just as sheep-like as those they presume to lead.)

ECOLOGY AND THE PANDEMIC

At the beginning of the pandemic some hopeful voices were raised in aid of the idea that it was, as George Monbiot wrote in the *Guardian*, "nature's wake-up call to a complacent civilization."[\[54\]](#)

Climate change activist Bill McKibben, writing in the *TLS*, also read the pandemic as a warning – "a dry run" for a coming century of horrors in which "there is going to be nothing normal anywhere."[\[55\]](#) I call these voices hopeful, because they interpret the pandemic as a call to repentance. I would like to share this view, but I find it difficult to see in the "war" against the virus any relenting whatsoever in our civilization's animating passion for domination and control. It seems rather to bespeak the opposite – an intensified desire to

become the “masters of our pandemic fate” and the conquerors of this inconvenient scourge, determined to save “lives” even if it costs us even more “lives” than we are saving – like the American commander in Vietnam who told Associated Press reporter Peter Arnett in 1968 that it was “necessary to destroy the town to save it.” This does not seem to me to presage the ethic of re-inhabitation that will at last bring us into harmony with our wasting world.

No one really knows where the new virus came from. To call it a product of “Nature” is probably a stretch. For, whether it came from a pangolin, a bat or a laboratory, as the producers of the documentary “Plandemic” hint, it is certainly a product of that hybrid nature/culture that has resulted from humanity’s unremitting pressure on every part and particle of our earthly home. As such it is a part of our world, as viruses have been as long as humanity has existed. Viruses have helped us – some stitched over time into our very DNA – and they have hindered us – to such an extent that we possess very robust defences against the hail of viruses we encounter every day. This does not mean, of course, that COVID-19 is our friend, but it does mean that we are dealing with something primordial, and something that belongs to the wild and profuse creativity of the living earth, however malign it may be to our plans for next Tuesday. One might wish for more of this perspective in those who propose that we should achieve “zero COVID,” become “masters of our pandemic fate,” “conquer COVID,” etc.

British biologist Mike Yeadon, whom I quoted earlier, is a veteran research scientist specializing in “inflammation, immunology, [and] allergy in the context of respiratory diseases.” He recently made the following statement: “The passage of this virus through the human population is an entirely natural process that has completely ignored our puny efforts to control it.”[\[56\]](#)

My own amateur researches have gradually led me to a similar conclusion. But anyone whose views have been shaped by politicians, public health officials, or media pundits like André Picard is bound to regard such a view as arrant nonsense, not only erroneous but almost treasonably dangerous to the public weal. Everyone who drinks from these wells knows that what a given country has been through is almost entirely a consequence of how politicians and public health officials have “managed” or, in the case of Donald Trump, “calamitously mismanaged” the pandemic. Countries are regularly compared as if the only relevant difference between them were the extent of the restrictions imposed by their governments. Climate, demography, geographical situation, health status, prior immunity – all have been more or less ignored in favour of the idea that government policy is the key determinant in the spread or containment of the virus. Let me take some examples.

One is given by Mike Yeadon, in the presentation I just quoted. He notes that countries with relatively high death rates due to COVID, like Sweden, Belgium and the U.K. all had much milder than usual flu epidemics over the last two to three years, while those with lower rates like Germany and Greece are coming off more severe flu epidemics. This suggests that the difference between, let’s say Norway and Sweden which has again and again been ascribed to severity of lockdown is, in fact, a function of the number of susceptible old people in each country.

A second example: a recent paper in the scientific journal *Frontiers of Public Health* found that, “[The] stringency of the measures [used] to fight pandemia, including lockdown, did not appear to be linked with death rate.”[\[57\]](#) Instead the authors of this paper found that what best predicted the death rate was latitude (between 25° and 65°), GDP, and health

status (amount of chronic disease, inactivity, etc.) And, third, I would point, as Yeadon does, to the degree of prior immunity in a given population.^[58] Yeadon argues that cross-immunity conferred by exposure to other coronaviruses – SARS COV-2 is 80% similar to the first SARS virus – may have made a part of the population immune to COVID-19 at the outset. This is germane in the case of countries like Taiwan and Vietnam that have had very few COVID deaths. Both had considerable exposure to SARS and so may have possessed this prior immunity in much greater measure than worse-affected Western countries. This suggests, again, that policy and popular compliance may have had less to do with lower death rates than has generally been supposed.

Whether Mike Yeadon's claim – that our "puny efforts" to contain the pandemic have been absolutely without effect – can eventually be proved remains to be seen. What it seems quite safe to say right now is that there is substantial evidence, first, that we are in the grip of a powerful and inexorable natural process and, second, that some considerable part of the pretence that determined leaders with bespoke policies ought to be able to dominate this process is mostly bravado, ritual and anthropocentric self-importance.

The conclusions I draw from these two points are not comforting. Ivan Illich, speaking in Toronto in the fall of 1970, evoked the view of the earth from space that had recently been obtained by American men-on-the-moon. This image, he said, could be interpreted in two radically different ways. The first was as a call to repentance, a call, in effect, to sink back into the earth and to live within its affordances. The second was as a call to "manage planet earth," as *The Scientific American* would later say, or, with even greater hubris, to "save planet earth."^[59] The first he saw as a choice to live freely, joyfully and even wildly, within our means; the second as a decision to perpetually skirt disaster, living always at the very edge of the biosphere's tolerances, and entangling ourselves in an ever more comprehensive net of hygienic and environmental controls in order to keep this precarious enterprise "sustainable." Today, looking out my door at the masked and fearful people passing on the street, it is hard not to think that Illich's prophecy has come to pass. From the beginning of the pandemic there were critical virologists, immunologists and epidemiologist who made three crucial points: first that no one knew the severity of the new disease, i.e. its infection mortality rate; second, that no one knew how different populations and different sub-groups within populations would weather it; and, third, that no one knew how the possibly devastating consequences of prophylactic mass quarantine – lockdown – would compare with the suffering that might be caused by the disease.

But these cautions, to the extent that they were even heard, did not seem to induce any hesitation or produce that alert but quizzical and deliberate attitude that ought to attend such ignorance. From the very beginning any idea of enduring, adapting or mitigating was condemned as fatalism or "yahoo" recklessness. The emphasis was always on control – "wrestling the virus to the ground"^[60] – and on knowledge – gained by colonizing and appearing to tame an uncertain future with mathematical models founded on "educated" guesses. This posture was reinforced by media who stood by ready to taunt any politician who refused to accept these shibboleths or was unwilling to pretend that control was possible and that scientific knowledge was at hand. And these media in turn, as I wrote in an earlier essay, were acting as the agents of imperative concepts like risk, safety, management, and life – concepts that have by now entrenched themselves in our minds as unquestionable certainties.

What has all this to do with the ecological emergency on which I quoted George Monbiot and Bill McKibben at the outset? Well it seems to me that the attitudes brought to light by the

pandemic do not offer much hope in the face of the catastrophic earth changes that both writers expect will be the result of rising oceans and a warming atmosphere – at least not for someone like me, who favours the path Illich recommended – conviviality within restraint – rather than the one he warned against – growth under intensifying control.

And even for those who would affirm the necessity of strict control, and dismiss Illich's vision of joyful austerity as a long-faded dream, there is the question of whether pandemic policy has fostered intelligent control. Consider: policy has been driven more by panic than by prudence; science has been at the same time idolized and ignored; the well-off have fortified themselves, while those with a more precarious hold on livelihood, shelter, and even sanity have been cast off; political enmity has intensified; political categories have grown more rigid and confining; media have become more conformist and censorious; the sick and the dying have been denied comfort; and people have grown more afraid of one another. This does not promise the more sensitive attunement to our world that our ecological impasse asks for. It suggests an impenetrable human narcissism mesmerized by its own myths and sealed up in an increasingly artificial reality.

AGAMBEN AND PHILOSOPHY

The most ambitious attempt to draw out the epochal implications of the COVID-19 pandemic that I have seen is a short piece by Giorgio Agamben called "Medicine and Religion."^[61] In this article Agamben argues that the pandemic has allowed science in the guise of medicine to occupy the entire space of existence, displacing every other human claim. In modernity, he says, "three great systems of belief" have uneasily coexisted. These are Christianity, capitalism and science, and they have achieved, through a history of conflict, intersection and negotiation, "a sort of peaceful articulated co-existence." But now bio-medicine has found the occasion to extend its "cult" even into domains where capitalism and Christianity formerly exerted their hegemonies:

[Medicine's] cultic practice was like every liturgy episodic and limited in time... [T]he unexpected phenomenon that we are witnessing is that it has become permanent and all-encompassing. It is no longer a question of taking medicine or submitting when necessary to a doctor visit or surgical intervention, the whole life of human beings must become the place of an uninterrupted cultic celebration. The enemy, the virus, is always present and must be fought unceasingly and without any possible truce.

Agamben uses the term "cult" here in the sense used by religious scholars to describe the devotional practices of any religion – the means by which a religion is *cult*-ivated – and not in the contemporary sense of a deviant group under the spell of some charismatic leader. Medicine's cult is now total because it can prescribe every gesture we are to make and proscribe the practices of competing cults.

Agamben's acknowledged ancestor here is Walter Benjamin. In a gnomic fragment called "Capitalism as Religion" which was published after his death, Benjamin speculated about capitalism as a form of religion. Capitalism, he argued, has the same fundamental structure as Christianity but in a displaced or disguised form. As a result of this displacement, the structure is rendered inaccessible – the devotee of the cult no longer knows what they are doing. In this way it becomes a total cult. Every day is a holy day (and therefore no day). Sin and its forgiveness are effaced, leaving only an endless inexpiable guilt. The eschatological element in Christianity – the view that a judgment awaits us at the end of time – is dispersed and deferred as a crisis that is never resolved, a growth that is never

enough, an innovation always requiring some further innovation.

Agamben doesn't spell all this out in his very short essay, but, in calling bio-medicine a cult that now aspires to a total jurisdiction, I believe he is imitating Benjamin's argument. (Agamben was the Italian editor of Benjamin's collected works, and he is the author of an essay called "Capitalism as Religion" which spells out the import of Benjamin's article much more lucidly than the original.[\[62\]](#)) It is clear enough, I think, that at least while the pandemic lasts, public health authorities are in a position to prescribe the gestures, all the gestures, we will make – where we can go, who we can see, how far away we should stand from them, what we should wear etc. – and to proscribe those we won't, including even absolute social and cultural fundamentals like care of the sick and dying, artistic performance, religious celebration, and the maintenance of family and community relationships. Whether these are only emergency powers, or, as Agamben clearly fears, the inauguration of a permanent state of emergency in which health security will at all times trump other cultural and social obligations, remains to be seen. Meanwhile his argument – that science in the guise of bio-medicine now superintends a comprehensive cult whose central object of reverence is life – is persuasive. People fail to see it or take it for granted only because life and the saving of "lives" has been so compellingly consecrated that it can no longer be examined or reasoned about.

What is important in Agamben's argument for me is the claim that we are witnessing the establishment of a new religion and the consolidation of its cult. To explicitly name this religion as science or medicine can be tricky because one is not just talking about the various practices of these fields, but about their presiding myths. The institutions of science and medicine supply this new cult with part of its priesthood but they are not what constitute the religion. What makes a religion, as Emile Durkheim argued more than a century ago, is the designation of a sacred dimension which is not to be touched, investigated or interfered with.[\[63\]](#) The sacred has the power to strike people dumb, to amaze them and, if necessary, to sacrifice them. This power now inheres in the demi-gods health, safety, risk awareness and, their epitome, life. So long as a certain course of action is seen to be saving lives, it's not really necessary to ask what else it might be doing.

This idea that we are faced with a religion and not just a contestable scientific point-of-view (though it is also that) has multiple implications. One is that this religion must be faced and criticized as such. This not to say that questionable scientific claims should not be challenged on scientific grounds, but only to recognize that ideas held, as it were, religiously, under scientific disguise, will not yield to scientific argument, however cogent. A second is that this new religion has not dropped from the sky but is derived from Christianity, the religion that so many think they have renounced, overcome and set aside. Benjamin argued in the essay discussed above that capitalism-as-religion is a "parasite" of Christianity. Ivan Illich, my teacher on this point, made the same argument with respect to the new "religiosity," as he called it, of life. We would not now be bowing to this new idol, he wrote, if Christians had not for two millennia preached and sought the "life more abundant" that Jesus promised when he announced to his friend Martha, without qualification, "I am Life."[\[64\]](#) Agamben, too, shares this view, suggesting in his essay that "The medical religion has unreservedly taken up from Christianity the eschatological urgency that the latter had let fall by the wayside." ("Eschatological urgency" here refers to the quasi-apocalyptic, Armageddon-like character of our mobilization against the virus.)

Two ideas follow: the first is that we are never more religious than when we think we have overcome religion; the second that our future is being determined, all unconsciously, by a

disowned and disregarded past.

Agamben's concern, which he has bravely expressed since the beginning of the pandemic, is that the rule of the religiously-sanctioned health security state has become "all-pervasive," "normatively obligatory," and deeply corrosive of any form of life that stands on competing grounds – funeral rites are an obvious example of such forms of life, and the outlawing of such rites, along with the abandonment of the dying, was one of the first elements of the pandemic regime to shock and alarm Agamben. What is demanded in response, he says, is that "philosophers must again enter into conflict with religion," – something that has "happened many times in the course of history." I believe this to be so, and I believe that what he means by philosophy is not a professional discipline open only to initiates but the very practice of freedom insofar as that practice requires us to understand how we came by our ideas, the grounds on which we are governed, and other such elementary matters. What Agamben calls "conflict with religion" might also be understood as a claim for freedom of religion (since it is arguable that no one can avoid having a religion, and therefore the best we can aspire to is to hold – and hold off – that religion freely).

Long ago, in 1971's *Deschooling Society* Ivan Illich made the claim that compulsory schooling, both by its ritual structure and its vaunting spiritual ambition, constituted a church, and, as such ought to be disestablished. Had medicine then been compulsory, he would doubtless have made the same claim in his *Medical Nemesis* (1975) which criticized medical establishments on the same grounds as his earlier book had analyzed compulsory schooling. Agamben's argument is that medicine has now also made itself "normatively obligatory," and that this new power will not necessarily recede with the pandemic. In 1791, the United States adopted a first amendment to its new constitution forbidding any law "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Section Two of Canada's Charter of Rights guarantees Canadians the same freedom. So far these freedoms have been understood as applying only to what are obvious, explicit and formally-constituted churches.

If Illich and Agamben are right, the truly powerful churches – the ones that tell us not only how we ought to live but how we *must* live – exert their claims on us in the name of education, health, safety, risk reduction and other shibboleths of the new religion. It follows that we now need what Illich's dear friend, the American critic Paul Goodman, called a "new reformation."^[65] The freedoms for which the first Reformation fought must now be fought for again.

David Cayley. distinguished author and radio documentary producer. [Click here for his bio](#)

NOTES

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[3] <http://www.balancedresponse.ca/>

[4] <https://gbdeclaration.org/>

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[6] Ibid.

[7] https://www.who.int/bulletin/online_first/BLT.20.265892.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=CampaignMonitor_Editorial&utm_campaign=LNCH%20%2020201016%20%20House%20Ads%20%20SM+CID_67ee9eb414f5b55517be202ffd3379bd

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/542c2af8e4b00b7cfca08972/t/58ffb590db29d67edabd4e26/1493153189310/How+To+Think+About+Science.pdf> See also *Ideas on the Nature of Science*, ed. David Cayley, Goose Lane, 2009

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- [21] Socrates speaks of “the noble lie” in Republic, Book III, 414b
- [22] Sunetra Gupta, “A Contagion of Hatred and Hysteria,”
<https://www.aier.org/article/a-contagion-of-hatred-and-hysteria/>
- [23] <https://www.aier.org/about/>
- [24] André Picard, “Don’t be complacent about COVID-19,” *The Globe and Mail*, Sept. 29, 2020, A13.
- [25] “Forget Politics. It’s time to fight COVID-19,” *The Globe and Mail*, Sept. 21, 2020, A12
- [26] André Picard, “Fasten your seat-belts,” *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 9, 3030, p. A7
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<https://ocla.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Rancourt-Masks-dont-work-review-science-re-COVID19-policy.pdf>
- [28] Carl Heneghan and Tom Jefferson, “Do Face Masks Work?” *The Spectator*, Nov. 19, 20
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- [37] <https://plandemicseries.com/>
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- [39] <https://vaxxedthemovie.com/>
- [40] The paper is here and still legible under the big RETRACTED stamp on every page:
<https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673697110960/fulltext>
- [41] Republic, Book V, 473 c-e

[42] Matthew 5:5

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[63] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, The Free Press, 1995 (first published 1912)

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