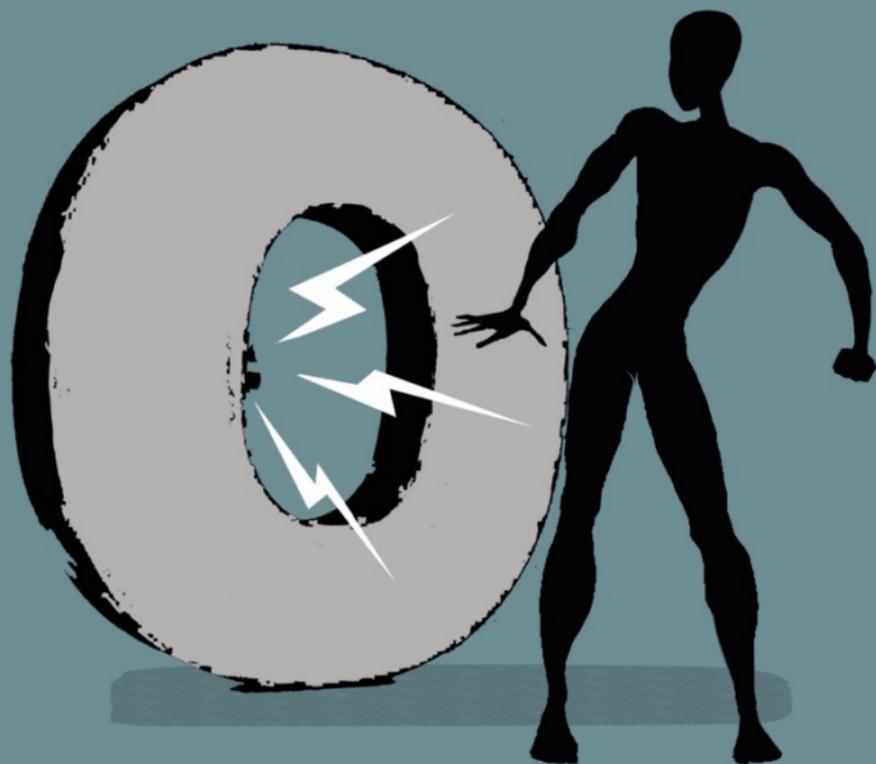


— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



**TOXIC SOCIALITY:
REFLECTIONS ON A PANDEMIC**

Josie Appleton

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

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TOXIC SOCIALITY: REFLECTIONS ON A PANDEMIC

The nineteenth-century German pathologist Rudolf Virchow said that ‘a pandemic is a social phenomenon that has a few medical aspects’.ⁱ Every pandemic has a social dynamic as well as an epidemiological course, and this equally structures the way the disease is seen and responded to. In the church-dominated early Middle Ages, for example, plague meant sinfulness - a plague outbreak was the occasion for praying and atoning and the exiling of immoral figures such as prostitutes or drunkards.

Then, with the emergence of the modern state from the late Middle Ages, the disease took on the new meaning of disorder and the upturning of hierarchies. Michel Foucault says that the remedy now was the imposition of order on the part of the state: the imposition of ‘strict divisions... [and] the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life’.ⁱⁱ The plague town was now not the occasion for religious excess, but rather for state order - for the sorting of the sick from the well, forcible confinement in homes or pest houses, the imposition of quarantines and *cordons sanitaires*.

In the nineteenth century, cholera was identified with the revolutionary threat of the urban masses, such that the disease and uprisings were seen as going hand in hand. In the 1980s, AIDS meant immorality and sexual profligacy, against which was recommended a careful and restrained approach to sexual life.

The epidemic disease, in every instance, was identified with some kind of threat to social order. The medicine was an intensification of social order, whether in the form of religious observances, state surveillance or safe sex.

What, then, is the meaning of our latest pandemic?

Toxic sociality

Coronavirus has a strange and historically unprecedented meaning. It is not a specific threat to social order - as was the case with diseases that were emblems of irreligion, rebellion or promiscuity. Instead, coronavirus has a more general meaning, that of toxic sociality. It symbolises the threat posed by the human social relation in general.

Coronavirus represents the notion that our everyday social relations - shaking hands, kissing, talking, being

near someone, even seeing their face - are the source of risk and danger. The human relation itself takes on the meaning of contagion; the other person, for us, is one who is potentially infected.

The virus is taken as deprived of its own natural reality and reproductive patterns; it is taken as an index of the degree of social freedom, the extent to which we have followed the rules, or not.

Specifically, coronavirus embodies the toxicity of the free social relation, of relations that are unforced, convivial, unregulated or voluntary. This is the image of what causes the spread of the virus: an uninhibited social group, an extended family around the dinner table or crowds of football supporters in the streets. Coronavirus is not seen as resulting from the supermarket or factories, or from state institutions such as hospitals or care homes or prisons, although transmission can be much greater in these spheres.ⁱⁱⁱ

Coronavirus became the spontaneous social gathering, caused by people being too free, not careful enough, too uninhibited, too caught up in their friends or families or lovers. This is why the British state closed pubs and bars while it did little to stem transmission in hospitals - and indeed while it spread the virus into

care homes by sending infected residents back without testing them.

Citizens were prevented from going into the wide empty spaces around them and were instead made to walk in the village or town where they live, perversely making proximity to others more likely.

Rising cases of the virus were read directly as the consequence of acts of freedom, of people who had been 'failing to abide by the rules'. The virus is taken as deprived of its own natural reality and reproductive patterns; it is taken as an index of the degree of social freedom, the extent to which we have followed the rules, or not. The freer we are, the more the virus rises. By the same account, the more restricted we are, the more the virus is expected to fall - and there is puzzlement as to why particular restrictions have had no effect. (For example, why did the tier system in the UK appear to make little difference, why was the second lockdown in autumn less successful at limiting the virus than was the first in the spring, and why does Wales have far higher cases than England despite introducing much tighter restrictions?)

This rampant virus is equated with the rampant element of social life and free subjectivity - the part of

social life that is free, that escapes boundaries, that moves into unexpected combinations. The virus stands for the space where people mingle and combine, the part of life that is unregulated. This rampant force must not be allowed to 'let rip'; the virus must be 'suppressed', meaning that free and informal social life must be suppressed.

Coronavirus measures often target acts or relations that are free acts, although these contain no health risk. In the first UK lockdown, police forces sent drones to video people walking in the Derbyshire Dales, and other officers stopped couples or families from sunbathing in London parks. French, Spanish and Italian citizens were forbidden from walking in the countryside or walking on empty mountains or beaches near their homes. French police helicopters flew over empty mountains to swoop on solitary walkers and fine them, walkers who were the least likely people in the country to be transmitting or catching the virus. Citizens were prevented from going into the wide empty spaces around them and were instead made to walk in the village or town where they live, perversely making proximity to others more likely.

While our free relations or acts are seen as toxic, every act of subordination to state control is given the meaning of a prophylaxis.

The medicalisation of bureaucracy

In France and Spain during lockdowns, people had to fill in forms every time they left home - they had to justify themselves by giving the time and ticking the box for their reason to leave the house. People were fined not because they were doing something that was risky to public health, but because they did not have the form or permission slip, or perhaps they had made a mistake and filled in the wrong date or time. The crime is not the risky action, but rather the journey for which you do not have permission.

This state of restriction - of rule following - is seen as virtuous and safe, regardless of the effectiveness of the measures. You must stand one or two metres apart, be home by 6pm or 8pm or 9pm or 10pm or 11pm, gather in a group of five or six or 10 from one or two households. A person must be within 100m, or 1km, or 5km, or 10km of their homes. These rules were backed up with the might of state sanction, as if the very existence of society depended on them being obeyed to the letter. Citizens risked six months in prison for going for three walks in the mountains in France, or a £10,000 fine for a nurse who organised a small gathering in Manchester.^{iv} British cafes and pubs were fined £1,000 for allowing people to order alcohol

without food or allowing bookings of people from more than one household.^v

The 'bubble' - such as a support bubble, Christmas bubble, bubble in school groups, bubble for a particular event - is the replacement for free social life.

Any form of social separation is seen as a medical protection. The French call masks and other measures a *geste barrière*, a 'barrier action', something that puts up a barrier between people. The mask is favoured because it blocks the social relation, rather than because of any significant evidence that it is effective. In Italy, for months people had to wear their masks outside *everywhere*, unless they could guarantee that they would not come across a person from outside their family. You can put on a mask that is germ-ridden or grubby - that is, you can put on a mask that spreads infection - so long as you have a mask, so long as your face is covered. The faith placed in the mask is not because it is always effective in preventing the spread of coronavirus, but because people cannot relate or communicate, they cannot see expressions and are shut off from one another socially. The mask becomes a barrier, not against coronavirus, but against a free sociality that is seen as toxic.

Meanwhile, the ‘bubble’ - such as a support bubble, Christmas bubble, bubble in school groups, bubble for a particular event - is the replacement for free social life. The bubble is a state-authorised association, formed for a particular purpose, and without rights to interact outside of this authorised grouping. There is a prohibition on people forming different or successive bubbles, and a prohibition on ‘mingling’ between bubbles. The bubble creates a social life that is delimited, circumscribed, and not expansive. To choose one household as your support bubble is to exclude all others from that relation.

The weaponisation of vaccination

Even the vital public-health measure of vaccination is transforming into a project of state incorporation of free social life, with measures such as Covid passports and mandatory vaccination spreading across Europe.

In France, all over-12s must present a vaccine passport in order to access restaurants, museums, long-distance trains, and outdoor and indoor sports facilities. The whole of social life becomes a checkpoint: Covid-pass checks are installed at the entrance of open-air horse-riding facilities, in bars and at the entrance of swimming pools.

The vaccinated person is treated as safe, and the unvaccinated person as risky. This distinction is made not on public-health grounds (since we now know that vaccination has a limited effect on preventing transmission), but because the unvaccinated person stands as the figure that has resisted state authority. They are the dissident, the person who refused to roll over. A young French woman who tried to enter a shopping centre without a Covid pass was set upon and beaten by a group of armed police.^{vi} She was beaten not because she is a public-health risk, but because she represents a threat to public order.

In European nations, like Austria, specific lockdowns were announced for the unvaccinated, creating a two-tier society of jabbed and unjabbed. Vaccination is no longer a pure public-health measure, offered to people as a public service. The push for 100-per-cent vaccination has become a project of incorporating the whole population, whether a vaccine is of benefit to particular groups or not.

It is perverse and tragic that vaccination - a measure carried out for the benefits of the recipient and society at large - is being transformed into a question of submission of people to state authority. This corrupts the rational public-health use of vaccines, just as surely as it strangles civic freedoms and liberties.

Policing a pandemic

While social life is seen as infected, state representatives seem curiously immune from infection. Instead, they are given licence to move about freely (without social distancing) demanding that citizens produce forms or telling them to get off the grass. In the first lockdown, the French police patrolled neighbourhoods fining people and (in Parisian suburbs at least) beating them up. It was seen as a risk for a man to be alone on a street, but not for him to be beaten up - his sweat and blood and breath mingling with those of the officers. The French police carried out over 20million checks in the first lockdown and issued one million fines.^{vii} The only thing moving in France was the state; the population was immobilised, stuck, while the state moved freely like flies from person to person.

In the UK, police arrested a woman sitting quietly on her own on a bench, manhandling her and placing her in a van with dozens of officers.^{viii} In the third UK lockdown, columns of police marched through Hyde Park, packed closely, shoulder to shoulder, stopping to challenge any loose-knit group and telling them to 'go home'.^{ix} The group of four or five people was dangerous, but the column of state agents was safe -

even though their lungs could infect and transmit as well as any other.

Indeed, the state agent is seen as so benign that various countries decided to send their workers into people's homes in the middle of lockdowns. In France, the government decided to change every home's electricity meter while barely out of the second lockdown. People who had not been allowed to have anyone in their home suddenly received a letter saying that they must book an appointment for an electrical agent. The presence of a friend was not permitted, but that of the state agent was obligatory - you could not refuse.

This benign view of the official agent contrasts with that of the seventeenth-century London plague. Back then, inspectors of plague houses could not talk to any other person or enter any house other than a plague house. As they walked in the street, plague inspectors had to carry a stick in front of them in order to warn people to keep away. In spite of their imperfect medical knowledge, they realised that state agents were more of a danger to the people than the people were to them.

In previous pandemics, the state response was one of order, defined by sorting the sick from the well. The plague town would confine the sick and their contacts

while allowing the well to go about their business. A ship arriving in a port would have to declare where they had come from, and whether their previous location was a plague area or if the ship had a clean bill of health. If in contact with the disease, the ship would be held for 40 days, with its items subjected to airing or disinfection before it was allowed to dock with people and goods. If it had a clean bill of health, the ship would be allowed to carry on immediately.

Coronavirus has become the universal currency for the free social relation, for every social contact, every exchange, every proximity, no matter what the age or sex of the people or whether they are immune or not.

Yet over the past year, there has been a deliberate avoidance of epidemiological distinctions in coronavirus regulations. People who had been vaccinated early in 2021 were told to conduct themselves ‘as if they had coronavirus’. Young people are still told that they are equally at risk, that coronavirus ‘doesn’t discriminate’, when this is palpably untrue.

There has been a deliberate attempt to get every single person to consider themselves both at risk of others and a threat to others. And so, coronavirus has

become the universal currency for the free social relation, for every social contact, every exchange, every proximity, no matter what the age or sex of the people or whether they are immune or not.

Understanding what is at stake, and defending our autonomous status as sociable beings, must be our first small step of resistance.

This indicates a new kind of state regulation, which is not based on rational ordering, on sorting and organising, but rather where the state operates as a great immobiliser, an instrument of separation and inaction. The state has turned against civic life *in toto*, against every free contact between people. It seeks to introduce a ‘barrier’, to formalise the informal, to legislate for who is around the dining-room table and how far the chairs are from one another. And when the state treats free social life itself as toxic, it approaches a new level of inhumanity as well as a new degree of irrationality in public-health measures.

No matter how sophisticated our science and vaccines, no matter how much better we understand disease than they did in the times of Rudolf Virchow, the playing out of events suggests that a pandemic remains ‘a social phenomenon that has a few medical aspects’.

Today, this 'social phenomenon' amounts to no less than the state's creeping assault on free sociality. Understanding what is at stake, and defending our autonomous status as sociable beings, must be our first small step of resistance.

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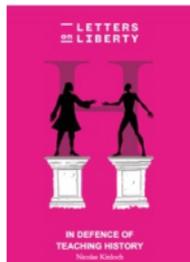


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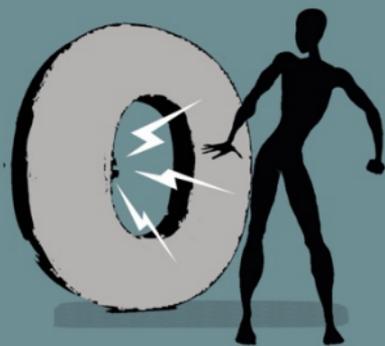
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