

Pandemics Are the Health of the State

by Theodore Dalrymple



Whatever we might think of the concept of historical inevitability, one thing seems predictable: that when the present epidemic of the new coronavirus is over, there will be much debate over the lessons to be drawn from it. These lessons will depend on assessment of the effects, both positive and negative, of what was done during it. It is unlikely that any debate will be conclusive, in the sense that no rational man could disagree with any particular conclusion; the ideological noise will be loud, even deafening.

In fact, the debate is already beginning, though the end of the epidemic is not yet in sight and vital questions, for example as to the true fatality rate of infection, are still to be answered. Even this question, which seems purely

factual, will give rise to multiple revisions. And what is the proper measure of severity in any case, number of deaths occasioned, or number of years of human life lost? The two measures may give very different notions of how serious the epidemic was, at least by comparison with other epidemics.

The more variables, the more scope for reasonable disagreement, and no doubt for unreasonable and acrimonious controversy also. How far were the measures taken effective and therefore necessary? Could and should they have been taken sooner, or could and should they have been more targeted at the especially vulnerable? Did anyone properly take into account the negative effects of what was proposed? There will be histories and revisionist histories for a century to come.

In France, much of the commentary so far examines the proper role of the state in ameliorating both the epidemic itself and its economic after-effects. The predominant message is that state action is the only means by which this can be done; and I think few would dispute that, whatever the role of the state ought to have been, or ought to be in the future, the state, relative to the rest of society, has in fact been considerably strengthened by the epidemic. Furthermore, there are many who want it to be strengthened yet further, and who welcome the quasi-totalitarian control of people's lives that the epidemic provoked. Jean-François Revel wrote a book titled *The Totalitarian Temptation* more than forty years ago, and totalitarianism is still tempting, at least to some; I still hear eulogies to the war years, when the population was said to have eaten more healthily than ever before thanks to government allocation to all of a carefully- and scientifically-calculated nutritious and balanced diet. We did it then, why can't we do it now, especially as overeating of the wrong foods has led to an epidemic of diseases such as Type II Diabetes? The cost of this is often borne by the public purse; why, therefore, have the keepers of the public purse not the *locus standi* to dictate the population's diet?

Consistency, at least in matters of public policy, is no doubt the hobgoblin of little minds, and not every argument has to be followed to its logical conclusion. Philosophical abstractions cannot be the sole guide to our political actions, though neither can they be entirely disregarded. The man with no principles is a scoundrel; the man with only principles is a fanatic.

A foretaste of the discussions and no doubt political disputes to come was published in the French left-wing newspaper, *Libération*, on the 27 March. The newspaper has come a long way in the direction of reason and moderation since its foundation by Sartre in his most Maoist days and is now a journal of the domesticated left. The article that caught my eye bore the headline "[Library of Law and Liberty](#)."