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Opinion

A letter from lockdown — Thoughts on Covid-19



by
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At the time of writing, we are around a week into total lockdown. This is time, perhaps, for a few reflections on the madness going on all around us.

As the economy has been partially shut down by the government in an unprecedented move, it is in the world of economics that I would like to begin. I have long found economics to be one of the keys to understanding society and human action. My route into this was a deep study of the economics that the state does not want people to know about — the [Austrian School](#) [1].

Unlike the conventional Keynesian thought that I studied whilst at university, and its offshoot, the Chicago School, the school of Austrian economics employs few graphs and almost no mathematics. Instead, it employs reason and axiomatic deduction to reveal truths about human action. One of the truths it reveals is that state intervention in the economy cannot improve upon the free exchange and individual choices of the people who make up a society, but it can, and generally does, make matters worse. This truth is not exactly music to the ears of government. It is therefore not surprising that the Austrian economists find themselves unwelcome in the mainstream of state-funded economics institutions. They instead live on the periphery of economic thought, saying beautiful, radical and insightful things and caring nothing for the consequences. In economic terms, the Austrians are very Rock 'n' Roll.

My personal study of economics started with grainy videos of lectures at the American University in Belgrade. I learned about the credit cycle, and what causes it. I was introduced to the idea that there are two types of lending: investment based on savings, which is beneficial, and investment based on nothing, which is not. ("Nothing" here being shorthand for central bank money printing and government interest rate manipulation.) It was a path into a world of radical ideas: from [Menger](#) [2] to [Mises](#) [3], and from [Rothbard](#) [4] to [Hoppe](#) [5], the lessons I learned were foundational.

When the 2008 crisis occurred, I found the apparent chaos all made sense. Everything I had been reading about was playing out on a global scale. It was a most impressive demonstration of the soundness of the line of thought.

Now, 2008-2010 was very tough: I am in the construction business and the crisis hit very hard. But bad as things got, the understanding provided by this previous study was a Godsend. It allowed me to perceive how and why the crisis was happening. It also showed me where my earlier lack of understanding had come from, to understand why I had made mistakes, what they were and what needed to be done about them. This was a huge benefit, for understanding the world around us in times of crisis allows not only a logical response but maintains sanity in circumstances that have the potential to destroy the human psyche.

The "bad brother" of economics, the Austrian School, also made it clear to me that, after the crisis, the state response was simply storing up more trouble for later and not actually fixing anything — just breaking it more badly. This provided a basis for personal decision-making that stepped away from the mainstream, a basis for my own independent view. I would have to conclude that a study of economics and the Austrians made me a more complete man, as I was no longer "the slave of some defunct economist" (to quote John Maynard Keynes).

In the period following 2010, I got involved in supporting the beautiful campaigner [Robert Green](#) [6]. He had, for a second time, been jailed in Scotland due to his eloquent calls for [justice for Hollie Greig](#) [7] and his tendency to [tell the truth](#) [8] in ways which [worried](#) [9] the powers-that-shouldn't-be very greatly. Therefore, economic study took a back seat. Instead, I was faced with human suffering of a most

alarming type. It was caused by use of state power to silence the innocent victims of abuse [10] as they cried out for help and justice. Being involved, in a small way, in this fight revealed darkly troubling things [11] about the people and institutions that govern us. I learned that misrule was the rule and that might made right. In the final analysis, our wise overlords could not justify their own actions and had not the slightest inclination to try.

At some point, I started to form the question, leading on from Austrian economics: if the free market is the most efficient way to deliver to people those things that they want, what is the effect if they want bad and harmful and evil things? I was driven to consider deeper aspects of what makes us act in the way we do. Why could those we appealed to concerning Robert Green and Hollie Greig not find the courage or integrity to address the issue? The conclusion I reached was that, in addition to the nature of man, culture and faith are core to this.

Andrew Breitbart [12] said politics is downstream from culture, and I think he is correct. However, I would add, culture is downstream from religion.

From Austrian economics, I learned that free exchange, property rights and sound money are core to a healthy society and that, with these in place, normal human action and interaction will chart its own way forward based on the desires of each individual in a society. Increasingly, I have added to that the question of what defines those individual desires and what the aggregate effect of errors by each of us is in formulating our plans. What is the effect on society if such cultural building blocks as lifelong monogamous marriage are destroyed? What if the role of men as leaders and protectors for the young, the weak and the frail is overturned? What if the very idea of manliness is painted as problematic or even toxic? What if the role of women in raising children is subverted [13] and they are instead persuaded or forced to go out to work? What if the welfare state sees an explosion in single-parent households? What if the very definition of man and woman is called into question? What if all of these ideas and more, even more harmful ones, are taught to our children [14] in the schools paid for by our taxes? What sort of society results? It is surely one in which our culture is changed out of all recognition.

And what if faith, so long the cohesive force pre-eminent in the West, fails across a society — what are the effects on the choices and desires of people?

Before he fell into insanity, Friedrich Nietzsche [15] wrote:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?
(Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*)

But he did so without gloating, for he had considered the possible effects of such a change:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism ... For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect. (*Will to Power*)

... For when Truth battles against the lies of millennia, there will be shock waves, earthquakes, the transposition of hills and valleys, such as the world has never yet imagined, even in its dreams. The concept of "politics" then becomes entirely absorbed into the realm of spiritual warfare. All the mighty worlds of the ancient order of society are blown into space — for they are all based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never been seen on earth before. Only after me will there be grand politics on earth. (*Ecce Homo*)

So Nietzsche, who was no friend of contemporary Christianity to be sure, did seem to perceive that the response to its fall from a leading role in general society would be catastrophe and wars. The twentieth century seemed to prove him right in this, as the people embraced the new certainties of totalitarianism and replaced God with The Cause or The Nation to give them the needed clarity and to form the basis for action and renewed hope.

But now, in the twenty-first century, faith remains absent, and the great dictators have passed into history, for the moment at least. What, then, has become of our culture?

It seems that instead of nihilism and the totalitarian certainties that followed it, we now have a society defined by fear.

Take the global warming alarmists, for example. Every time the sun comes out, and our damp little island has a lovely summer's day, the response is hysterical fear that man-made global warming, or climate change, or climate breakdown, or whatever the next marketing ploy is called, will destroy the earth.

We have an astroturf (fake grassroots) organisation called Extinction Rebellion [16] disrupting everyday life and campaigning to tell us all, and especially our children, that the end is nigh; that death — literal extinction — awaits us all unless we embrace their brand of socialism and obey their instructions.

And this brings us to the most recent episode of windiness concerning Covid–19. Without any more evidence than has been present in dozens of previous years, seasonal flu has suddenly been elevated to an existential threat. We are told that the only thing to do is to accept house arrest, or else we are "killing people". Our economy is shut down, our society changed out of all recognition. And this despite there being no increase in death rates compared to the norm.

Experts guide government policy without, it would seem, the government officials tasked with directing our nation having the strength or wisdom to question and test the advice, to seek contrary views and to examine in detail the basis for the wild and unlikely claims made.

When outsiders and mavericks ask questions [17] concerning the data analysis and data gathering underpinning these dark prophecies, the answers reveal only emptiness, uncertainty and error.

Despite all this, the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus seems happy with the restrictions, and more inclined to report his neighbour to the authorities for some slight contravention of government advice than to resist the imposition of near-universal house arrest [18]. Could it be that, in a society now defined by its fears, independent thought is a rare thing, both in Downing Street and on the High Street [19]?

And why should this be? I would suggest the cultural shift is merely an effect of the change in belief and loss of faith. Our society was once based on Christianity, a most radical and non-conformist ideology. Recall that one of the core ideas expounded by Christ was:

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. (Matt. 16:25)

This challenged the greatest of all fears, that of death, and did it boldly and directly. The society that believed this was able to look death in the face, seeing not the ultimate tragedy, but merely part of life. What, then, of our current faithless society, how can it cope with death? It seems that, in passing into a post-Christian epoch, we have lost the very basis for strength, soundness and gallantry in the face of any serious threat. The truth that there is

... a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted (Ecclesiastes 3:2) ...

can no longer be faced so boldly as once [20] it was.

What, then, is a society ruled by its fears likely to do?

- It will undoubtedly obey anyone who can offer safety [21], at whatever price [22].
- It will place trust in the medical profession and related experts and not raise vital questions [23].
- It will panic and destroy itself [24] in times of crisis.

I conclude, therefore, that lacking faith, and driven by fears, our society has consented to the destruction of its economy and has sacrificed liberties fought for over centuries [25] without a backward glance. And what monster do we run from? One summoned from seasonal flu, corona virus and tales from China. Without any excess death in our society, we have allowed experts from Imperial College to assure us that half a million or more will die unless we acquiesce to our national destruction.

How should we sum up such a society? I would suggest we should quote the words of the old proverb [26]:

The wicked flee when no one pursues.

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- [1] <https://mises.org>
 [2] <https://mises.org/library/principles-economics>
 [3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_von_Mises#Bibliography
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