
PROTESTING STATE POWER IN THE COMPETING CRISES OF COVID-19

Stuart J. Murray | May 29, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is not simply a crisis of public health. It is a nexus of multiple and fiercely competing crises, each with collateral damages. The two most immediate crises are surely biological and economic: between life and livelihood. In some respects, these represent competing values and regulatory systems, but they are also interdependent. We know that poverty and stress, for example, are significant social determinants of health that can predict poorer health outcomes and premature death. But we also know that re-opening the economy will necessarily result in a certain number of otherwise preventable illnesses and deaths as public health officials attempt to manage outbreaks in the many months to come.

In [his testimony to the U.S. Senate](#) on May 12, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci issued the stark warning that re-opening America's economy too soon would result in "needless suffering and death." But the measure of "suffering" and the definition of "needlessness" or its opposite, necessity, will differ depending on who you ask. These are slippery and age-old terms, sometimes even personified. Necessity was known to the ancient Greeks as the goddess *Ananke*, who dictated the fates of gods and human beings alike. She sometimes appears alongside the goddess *Bia*, a word that means force, power, or violence. And at first glance, those who protest government lockdown orders seem to inhabit such a mythological world, animated by fate and the spectre of violence. For them, re-opening the economy is demanded as a necessity. And the state's management of the crisis is seen as little more than a crisis of state management, where state intervention is deemed unnecessary and unwelcome, highly suspect or even "socialist."

[Widespread images](#) from many major U.S. cities depict militia-style vigilantes armed to the teeth, occupying state buildings, and claiming to defend their "rights" and "freedoms" (also slippery terms). Elsewhere, we continue to witness anti-lockdown protests across [Canadian](#) and [European](#) cities, and indeed, [worldwide](#). In the North American context, it's difficult to determine the extent to which local protests are driven by politics, ideology, or necessity (though I have yet to see an image of a sign that says, "I am hungry"). Loosely organized on social media platforms and some funded by conservative groups (at least one with apparent ties to a member of Trump's administration), the U.S. protests present as a ragtag collection of radicalized libertarians and Trump supporters.

But despite their differences, protesters globally do seem united in their singular will to tempt fate, to assume risk—or more accurately, to force others more vulnerable than them to assume it on their behalf. This is not the choice between "your money or your life." Odds are that it is someone else's life that will be pawned in this game, someone whose suffering and death will be "fated": business as usual. This is perhaps less macabre than it is familiar; it's just that these sacrificial economies are typically more discreet than they are in the time of COVID-19.

As communities begin to see downward trends on their epidemiological curves, how can they know the right moment to return to "normal," and at what pace? In other words, how are we to navigate between the demands—and collateral damages—of competing claims for public health and economic health, of lives and livelihoods? Even the most progressive democratic governments must admit a tolerable

threshold of death—an acceptable loss of human life—in re-opening their economies. If we knew these numbers, I suspect we’d find them shockingly high. A few deaths will be “unfortunate,” perhaps “inevitable,” but at what threshold do otherwise preventable deaths become too many to accept? Someone, somewhere, is crunching these numbers and quietly considering the voting public’s levels of tolerance to death. For all the talk of life’s “pricelessness,” every life does have a price, and some are undoubtedly valued more than others. This is the morbid calculus of an actuarial “science” as much as a political calculation. And the threshold will depend in part on who is dying.

In [an interview](#) published on April 8, Pope Francis remarked, “we’re realizing that all our thinking, like it or not, has been shaped around the economy. In the world of finance it has seemed normal to sacrifice [people], to practice a politics of the throwaway culture, from the beginning to the end of life.” The moral bankruptcy, it would seem, is not simply our shortage of medical supplies and personnel, or even our godlessness. It is a bankruptcy of our vocabulary, our imagination, and our capacity to think and act otherwise. What would it mean if our thinking and, indeed, the very terms by which to think have been colonized by economic vocabularies, metaphors, and idioms?

In the fierce competition of crises—between public health and economic health—it would mean that we could not objectively navigate between them. The very terms by which we navigate would impose their economic bias. To speak of economic “health” is itself a misuse of words and a mixed metaphor of sorts. But we barely bat an eye, even though we know that the economy is not a physical entity, and a “healthy” economy is always achieved by the suffering, ill health, or death of human beings. Such is the law of capital accumulation, the poisoned “freedom” of free markets.

Consider [the bioethics report](#) recently commissioned by the Québec government in response to the Italian crisis where doctors found themselves in the agonizing position of making life-and-death choices concerning patients in their care. A group of “independent experts,” including clinicians and patients, sought to establish protocols for the triage of hospital beds and ventilators in the case of an extreme shortage. The protocol is familiar and demonstrates the extent to which we are willing to cede to and apply an economic framework to calculate the worth of a human life. Some version of utilitarianism will prevail in triage: the same old “utility” of biological life informed by neo-Malthusian economies and histories of net “value,” “worth,” and “acceptable” (or even necessary) losses. It is dressed in “clinical” garb to lend an air of impartial authority. Patients with the greatest chance of biological survival will be privileged, with additional consideration for medium- and long-term outcomes, and special consideration for healthcare workers.

Again, these calculations are not new, it’s just that they become more explicit in the time of COVID-19. Our “throwaway culture,” as Pope Francis called it, is usually discreet and anonymous, part of a global financial system and worldview. For example, Canadians are seldom forced to consider the value of their own lives in relation to those rendered precarious by virtue of lucrative Canadian arms deals, pharmaceutical testing, or child sweatshop labour. Closer to home, we might consider the implicit “value” ascribed to the poor, the homeless, Indigenous communities, prisoners, and those in long-term care facilities, including the elderly. The precarity of other human lives is the hidden “utility” that props up the apparent value of our own. How, then, are power and domination to be calculated? It is perhaps fitting that *Ananke* and *Bia*, necessity and violence, go hand-in-hand.

Problematically, then, the terms of reasoned political debate are circumscribed in advance and delimit the ways that we can speak about or even conceive of an issue. Why, in a document on the ethics of deciding who will live and who will die, should it seem natural or just to speak in economic terms? What, after all, is the “utility” of a human life? Who has the authority to calculate this, and how? And by what sleight of hand could free-market principles ever be considered impartial or neutral in the first place? But we seem to have accepted the terms of the game with a quiet complicity, sensing at times that something is very wrong but lacking the means to articulate it and to live our lives otherwise.

We might just as well ask: what is the “utility” of a virus on human terms? To test the survival of the fittest among us, to test our collective will, or our compassion and care for others? On these terms the virus, too, might resemble a god.

The protesters, much like the virus, have something of value to teach—not so much for what they say as for the animus they do not quite articulate in words. As I say, the protestors are a ragtag lot; they have no manifesto and do not speak with one voice. Some are surely just bored or easily swayed by conspiracy theories. Others seek a return to the former comforts and privileges of business as usual. Others more radical still call for the overthrow of the state, or would hasten the “[boogaloo](#)”—a slang term twisted and appropriated by the alt-right signalling the coming civil war, a race war to be waged, this time, with the providential help of a virus that exploits biological and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The protests, then, expose the fault lines where the collision of public health and economic crises erupt as a social crisis that has been simmering for a long while.

The mythological “fates” and “necessities” of protesters, their sabre-rattling and neo-tribalism, share much with the worldview of religious fundamentalists, anti-vaxxers, and a swath of libertarians and “extremists” who locate their faith elsewhere. They seem committed to other gods or demons, are distrustful of evidence-based science and medicine, and are fearful of state power. And, arguably, they have had some effect on the hastened re-opening of the economy in many jurisdictions. This will surely result in otherwise preventable suffering and death.

To be sure, the protestors do not offer a coherent critique of calculative thinking and economic logics—but they ought to occasion one. They are perhaps easy to criticize, but a critique turns the gaze inward and should discomfit us rather than reproduce and validate what we already think we know. In this respect, the mythological worldview courting fate and violence almost parodies the cool efficiencies of the state, which for so long has also enshrined the ageist, ableist, racist, and economic rhetorics of “tolerable” suffering and death as a matter of public policy. How different are they really?

The protestors parody our hidden economies of “utility” and sacrifice, putting them on obscene display. If we manage not to turn our backs, we might for a moment discern our own hypocrisies reflected in these scenes, and find the courage to submit our old preconceptions and vocabularies to critique—to question what seems “natural” and “just,” and why these are neither fated nor necessary. If we do, we will have begun the difficult work of building a post-COVID-19 economy that will be more equitable for all, and not quite a return to business as usual.

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