



Social Distancing Was Supposed to Be Forever

Description

By April 2020, two months into the lockdowns, eminent Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben had put his finger on a point that was bugging many of us. He observed that the purpose of “social distancing” – really just a euphemism for confinement – was not intended merely as a temporary measure but a new structure for society itself.

Thinking it through, and deciding to speak out, he wrote that “I do not believe that a community based on ‘social distancing’ is humanly and politically liveable.”

He cited Elias Canetti’s 1960 book *Crowds and Power*, summarizing it as follows:

Canetti, in his masterpiece *Crowds and Power*, defines the crowd as the thing upon which power is founded through the inversion of the fear of being touched. While people generally dread being touched by strangers, and while all of the distances they institute around themselves are born of this fear, the crowd is the only setting in which this fear is overthrown.”

Canetti wrote:

It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. [...] As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. [...] The man pressed against him is the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body. [...] This reversal of the fear of being touched belongs to the nature of crowds. The feeling of relief is most striking where the density of the crowd is greatest.

Agamben elaborates:

I do not know what Canetti would have thought of the new phenomenology of the crowd

that we are witnessing. What social distancing measures and panic have created is surely a mass, but a mass that is, so to speak, inverted and composed of individuals who are keeping themselves at any cost at a distance—a non-dense, rarefied mass. It is still a mass, however,

If, as Canetti specifies shortly afterwards, it is defined by uniformity and passivity—in the sense that “it is impossible for it to move really freely. [...] [I]t waits. It waits for a head to be shown it.” A few pages later Canetti describes the crowd that is formed through a prohibition, where “a large number of people together refuse to continue to do what, till then, they had done singly. They obey a prohibition, and this prohibition is sudden and self-imposed. [...] [I]n any case, it strikes with enormous power. It is as absolute as a command, but what is decisive about it is its negative character.”

We should keep in mind that a community founded on social distancing would have nothing to do, as one might naively believe, with an individualism pushed to excess. It would be, if anything, similar to the community we see around us: a rarefied mass founded on a prohibition but, for that very reason, especially passive and compact.

The reaction to this heresy and others by this colossal academic figure was extreme and truly indescribable. There ought to be some other word than canceled. Friends, colleagues, translators, and fans the world over trashed him in the most extreme terms – newspapers, journals, tweets, you name it – not just for his writing on the pandemic response but also for his entire intellectual legacy. A man once revered came to be treated like vermin. You can [look at this essay](#) by a translator as one example.

So the question is whether he was right, and let us consider his observations on social distancing as just one example. It strikes me as quite brilliant. What he says about crowds, citing Canetti, pertains to cities, gatherings, groups, multigenerational households, multicultural communities, street parties, block parties, airports, pilgrimages, mass protests, migrants on the move, crowded subways, pool parties, beaches, or any place where strangers and people who barely know each other find themselves in close proximity.

Here we encounter each other's core humanity, and overcome the fear of treating each other in a dignified way. It is here in which we discover and internalize human rights and universal moral principles. We overcome the fears that keep us down and instead gain a love of freedom. Yes, this is the very opposite of “social distancing.” Someone needed to call it out: a prohibition against congregating is a prohibition of society.

And it's not as if the other side did not admit that their agenda was much broader. Consider a very strange tomb written during the lockdown summer of 2020 by Anthony Fauci with his long-time collaborator at the NIH David Morens. Together they theorize in the biggest possible way about the relationship between infectious disease and human society.

The article came out in [Cell in August of 2020](#), months after the frenzied statism began. The authors sought to explain why all this had to happen.

The problem, they say, began 12,000 years ago when “human hunter-gatherers settled into villages to domesticate animals and cultivate crops. These beginnings of domestication were the earliest steps in man’s systematic, widespread manipulation of nature.”

Among the resulting problems were “smallpox, falciparum malaria, measles, and bubonic/pneumonic plague,” and also Cholera and mosquito-borne illnesses like malaria, which only became about because humans “started water storage practices in Northern Africa” 5,000 years ago.

So on goes Fauci’s little march through history, always with the same theme. If there were fewer of us, had we never had much contact with each other, if we never dared to cultivate crops, domestic animals, store water, and move around, we could have been spared all diseases.

So there we have it. The real problem is what we call civilization itself, which is why the article ends with an assault on “overcrowding in dwellings and places of human congregation (sports venues, bars, restaurants, beaches, airports), as well as human geographic movement,” all of which “catalyzes disease spread.”

That’s it: the whole of human experience and progress summed up in one phrase: disease spread. That’s their summary judgment of the whole history of human evolution.

What should we do about this disease-ridden planet?

Living in greater harmony with nature will require changes in human behavior as well as other radical changes that may take decades to achieve: rebuilding the infrastructures of human existence, from cities to homes to workplaces, to water and sewer systems, to recreational and gatherings venues. In such a transformation we will need to prioritize changes in those human behaviors that constitute risks for the emergence of infectious diseases. Chief among them are reducing crowding at home, work, and in public places as well as minimizing environmental perturbations such as deforestation, intense urbanization, and intensive animal farming. Equally important are ending global poverty, improving sanitation and hygiene, and reducing unsafe exposure to animals, so that humans and potential human pathogens have limited opportunities for contact.

Do they want to go back to times when the planet only had a few people living on river banks, never moving, getting all food from moving waters, and dying early deaths? That’s going too far, they say. “Since we cannot return to ancient times, can we at least use lessons [of the past] to bend modernity in a safer direction?”

Who or what is going to do this mighty bending? We know.

Now, say what you want, this statist ideology of techno-primitivism makes other radicals like

Marx, Rousseau, [Joachim of Fiore](#), and even the [Prophet Mani](#) look like moderates by comparison. It’s not just that Fauci wants to end restaurants, bars, sports, and cities, not to mention pet ownership. He also wants to put a stop to the freedom of movement and even the storage of water. It’s a level of crazy that not even a freshman class in anthropology would touch.

Such is the vision that gave rise to “social distancing.” It was not really about preserving hospital

capacity and it was not just about two weeks. It was really about the complete reconstruction of social life itself, critiqued as pathogenetic starting 12,000 years ago, with Covid as only the latest example of the costs of free association.

Let's return to Professor Agamben, one of the most well-respected philosophers in the Italian language for the last half-century. Of course he smelled a rat. Of course he spoke out against the pandemic response. Of course he blew the whistle. How could any civilized, learned, literate scholar not do so? It is not Agamben who is the crazy one. He has never been anything but consistent.

The real anger and controversy should surround how it is that the world allowed [fanatics](#), who are on record in opposition to the last 12,000 years of human history, the opportunity to try a radical experiment in human separation and mass global imprisonment on nearly the whole planet Earth save a handful of nations that said no.

That should be the issue. It is still not. Which should reveal to us that humanity in general has nowhere come to terms with the appalling nature of what has happened and the intellectual influences we permitted to exercise hegemony over human life for the better part of two years. That in a word is insane.

by JEFFREY A. TUCKER

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