

The political theology of corona, the virus with a crown

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The first time I saw one of the sewn fabric masks that have now become so popular during the coronavirus pandemic was not in the United States, where I currently live, but in Venezuela. It was March 2020. My mother-in-law had just gotten internet in her home in a small city in the Venezuelan Andes, and my partner and I were able to have our first video call with her. She told us how a public health official had come to her home, reminding her to get tested at the local clinic free-of-charge, while her neighbor had sewn masks for the entire block. The cloth mask hid her expressions of concern as she asked about our health and the rates of infection in the United States. At that point, my partner was still leaving home to go to work, and I had just been asked to move from in-person to online teaching in the middle of the semester. I immediately developed an upper respiratory infection and dry cough, which was diagnosed as a presumptive case of Covid-19 (presumptive because no testing was available). In Texas, we had been unable to find thermometers, masks, or antiseptic in any nearby pharmacies. While Venezuela faced an ever tightening economic and military blockade by the United States that made no exceptions for medical supplies, masks and tests were already reaching my mother-in-law in her remote town.¹ Why was the response to a public health crisis in the United States, the leader of a global capitalist empire, more uncoordinated and less effective than in a country whose food and medical supplies had been severely compromised?

The answer leads us away from the material facts of medical supplies or national wealth and into the realms of the sacred. Rather than seeing the sacred's primary function as a balm for troubled times, as many accounts of religion's role during the pandemic have insisted, I see the sacred as an assertion about the location of sovereign power. The sovereign is that which can call a state of exception and supersede codified rules. In this way god(s), presidents, multinational corporations, protests, and viruses can all evidence

sovereign powers, but so can sanctified ideals, such as individual liberty, religious freedom, national security, and social welfare. These entities are all sacred because their exceptional natures have often authorized the suspension of laws and normal states of affairs on broad scales. In this way the sacred is what we might call “religious” and “political” at the same time. Rather than a monotheistic, Christian, or absolutist conception of sovereignty, evident in the right-wing architect of “political theology” and some of his heirs, the everyday world shows us how the sovereignty of presidents, viruses, or ideals is continually contested through conflicting assertions about what is sacred.

A new sovereign—a virus with a crown—has revealed two contrasting realms of the sacred during its own state of emergency. The first, the economic individual, has been the sacred object of US-led neoliberal capitalism. In practice, the worship of this neoliberal sacred has involved both the increasing dissolution of the social welfare state and the expansion of the security or carceral state. The result has been a dual ideology of marketized individualism and economic liberalization, on the one hand, and diversion of state resources from public services to racialized campaigns against crime, terror, or immigration, on the other. The second sacred realm highlighted by the pandemic—the social—has been neoliberal capitalism’s avowed enemy. The “end of history” supposedly signaled the triumph of neoliberal capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the defeat of neoliberalism’s enemies—namely, socialism and social welfare states. But the god of the social has not gone away in the face of the neoliberal privatization of the public. Instead of the ostensibly loving mid-twentieth century social welfare gods of Keynesian capitalism and socialist revolution, the social has returned from its attempted murder in a more vengeful form, as a virus popularly known by the Latin name for crown. This new sovereign signals the end of the former end of history, laying bare the continued importance of the social.

Of course, the neoliberal God of the Invisible Hand and its Son (economic Man) have not ruled forever. Rather than the “free market,” the sacred of much of the twentieth century was society. Two principal advocates of the opposing polarities that defined liberalism in the 1900s—sociologist Emile Durkheim and economist Friedrich Hayek—both deified society, albeit with very different consequences. For Durkheim, the divine was the social, with its originary forms found in “religion.” In his reckoning, god was actually society, and the social bond was what kept people from the brink of “anomie”—a condition of social isolation that he saw as the ultimate cause of relatively high suicide rates in industrialized societies.

For Hayek, in contrast, the social was the idol of the most corrosive tribe on earth—the social liberals descended from thinkers like Durkheim, who had allegedly bastardized their liberal ideals by prizing social justice and society above the individual economic interests of corporate persons. Hayek wrote that “society” was simply a “new deity,” a fetish emanating from social liberals’ ideas of what he called “the mirage of social justice.” For

Hayek and other neoliberal economists, the high priest of this fetish worship was John Maynard Keynes, theologian of the social welfare programs of the Great Depression and its aftermath. Hayek argued that these social liberals had corrupted true liberal values. It would take “neoliberalism”—an aggressive dismantling of social welfare programs, state services, and restrictions on private corporations—to correct the course. And the neoliberals, under the initial guidance of Milton Friedman—the high priest of a new Chicago cult of primitive accumulation—would get the Anglo-American ear of both the new right of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and the new Democrats/Labour of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

However, it was in Latin America where these reforms would be carried out in their “purest” (or most aggressive) form, under conditions of US-supported military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, revealing a foundational linkage between neoliberalism and neo-fascism that is readily apparent in the global right today. The God of the social, once the benevolent creator of all that was good, became a demiurge in this neoliberal drama, a pernicious deity who had imprisoned market forces and *homo economicus* in the straight-jacket of social welfare. But it seemed by the end of the 90s that, with the Cold War over and Keynesian economics put to bed, US-led neoliberalism had conquered the globe and the messianic “end of history” was at hand.

Today, we are at the definitive ending of this trumped-up end. We are increasingly realizing that the Cold War was never finished. Today, in the United States, the same enemies are trotted out—principally China and Russia—with the United States fighting these adversaries through its proxy conflicts. Rather than Vietnam, we have Venezuela, where the United States dispatched its largest military deployment in the Western Hemisphere since 1989 to surround Venezuela during the pandemic.² Even the novel coronavirus has been conscripted into this Cold War drama, with both the US president and his presumptive Democratic opponent blaming the virus on China and threatening retribution. Instead of offering the image of a benevolent sovereign who cares for its children during a pandemic, the ostensible faces of both of the major political parties in the United States compete in their Cold War-mongering. Under these conditions, is it any wonder that the god of the social is now a vengeful one, distilled into a virus with a crown?

Perhaps for these reasons, this new sovereign is the inverted image of the Durkheimian social. Corona privileges connection and proximity, exposing the networks of touch and movement that connect us. But rather than fostering an effervescent antidote to the anomie of social isolation along the lines of Durkheim’s conception of religion/society, such social proximity can foster sickness or death. This vengeful god of the social seems most deadly in those centers of neoliberal empire that tried to kill it—namely, the United States, the United Kingdom, and countries that have been subjected to regimes that are “ultra-neoliberal” in practice (and often neo-fascist in rhetoric). In South America, countries experiencing recent and dramatic neoliberal takeovers—Brazil and Ecuador—

have been epicenters of infections and deaths on that continent. (Brazil is currently second only to the United States in terms of total cases and daily deaths.) In Europe, a key epicenter of both infections and neoliberal/neofascist rhetoric has been Italy, with other countries that have experienced relatively strong commitments to neoliberal reforms in their recent pasts (e.g., France, the Netherlands, Spain, or Sweden) having higher death rates than their less neoliberal neighbors (e.g., Germany or Norway). In fact, it is the paragon of neoliberal empire—the United States—that has been the emblem of bungled attempts at addressing this new sovereign. And the failures in this country are not just because of inept leadership. They reflect the dearth of coordinated social service bureaucracies and public health care in favor of a patchwork, privatized field of divergent regulations, provisioning of resources, and testing (or its lack).

Yet, this turn away from the god of society and the rise of the virus with a crown have only foregrounded the power of mass social connection. While armed right-wing protesters in the United States have come together in defense of neoliberal values, many others have joined forces against neoliberal restructuring and the security state. Here in Austin, Texas, unarmed May Day protesters supporting “people before profits” and rent forgiveness were arrested, while a few blocks away gun-toting Americans freely spewed their rhetoric, as they have done at many other state capitols. The latter protests, waged not in the name of social justice or social welfare but on the basis of certain individuals’ rights to produce and consume, expose what has always been true: the freedom of some Americans is based on the death and endangerment of others. Recent episodes of police killings in Austin, Minneapolis, and elsewhere during the pandemic have driven this point home, exposing one of the key sites of neoliberal sovereignty since the 1980s—incarceration, state spending, and militarized policing driven by racism or anti-immigrant rhetoric. Yet, such punitive assertions of sovereignty have been less than absolutist, inspiring counter-assertions by mass social protests against the security and carceral state during the pandemic. Rather than dismantling the social bond, as countless laments during the pandemic have asserted, the virus with a crown has shown just how important social services, social justice, and social movements continue to be.

The new sovereign, the novel virus with a crown, will eventually be dethroned, as other exceptional powers—whether human or viral—take center stage. And no matter the outcome of the next election, neoliberalism will still be the gospel of the United States. Meanwhile, as this country “re-opens” its economy (and cuts short the expansion of state assistance for individuals), infections resulting from the novel coronavirus continue to kill, with daily death tolls highest under neoliberal regimes in the United States, Brazil, and the United Kingdom. In contrast, countries that have openly rejected the neoliberal prioritization of economic indicators over public health, such as Argentina or New Zealand, have had far more effective responses. US political leaders, including those in Texas, have espoused that “work” and “the economy” are more important than human deaths. But what is this “economic freedom” geared toward if not social welfare? The

church services, stock market portfolios, and individual rights of some Americans to consume have more value than these lives, according to this rhetoric. No matter how long this pandemic continues, it has revealed the sacred logic of the global economic system. This logic—economic “freedom” requires others’ deaths—enacts the sacrificial rite of neoliberalism’s sacred.