**The Return of the State**

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*Society chooses its dead (Sartre, 1976)*

A pandemic could be the context where the world sets aside differences and globally agree on how to best navigate our societies through the crisis. A pandemic does not distinguish between geographies, gender, ethnicity, or religion. Global solidarity, collaboration across old boarders, and a collective flexible humanitarian response seems the way forward. After all, we are in this together.

One of the remarkable aspects that have stood out again and again during the past weeks in the covid19 crisis, is how top politicians are gaining a new space of authority. Not necessarily because we agree with them or because we think they see the truth better than we do. Often on the contrary. But they gain increased symbolic power because they become centers of national action in times of a global crises.

Over a very short period of time, the world has realized how the state is the place where differences can be set aside and where collaboration across divergence can occur to create a response to a humanitarian threat. We have started to listen to our politicians with another level of attention, as we realize that their actions are immediately influential for life and death. We are willing to accept political recommendations that dramatically limit our daily freedom as we agree to work at home, stay at home, and not visit family and friends. We eagerly wait for (and tire of) the political daily updates on new guidelines and regulations. We are also realizing how national political decisions ten years ago on production and storage of PPE stocks are today putting hospital workers at high or low risk depending on national political foresight back then. We are witnessing how political decisions many years ago to for example give away to the market the responsibility to organize health, today put health at risk for entire populations. And we are now applauding political leaders who direct business to transform their production in support of overcoming the crisis. Interestingly, it is not only citizens who give new space to politicians. It is also business. We hear a new voice from free market agents, asking the state for help and for economic support to help them through the crisis. In good times, profit is private. In bad times, losses are public.

That political leaders are gaining authority does not mean that they suddenly become better decision-makers or that they agree on what is the best way to address the pandemic. But it means that there is a new urge to trust our political leaders.

That top politicians are trusted with much authority is not new in some of the small countries in Northern Europe. Sweden and Denmark have longstanding traditions for strong state support. Interestingly, in a time of crisis, this does not mean that the political leaders agree on the best approach to address the covid19 pandemic. The governments in these two Scandinavian countries have taken strategically different approaches to meet the pandemic. The Swedish politicians base their strategy on science: they give prominence to the science and to the epidemologists who emphasize the lack of evidence that locking down the entire society will reduce the number of deaths. They state that their ‘medical toolbox’ for now is limited to recommendations about social distancing, washing hands and being careful with the old and vulnerable. Just across the border, the Danish politicians give the same advice to the Danish citizens, but they give prominence to the uncertainty that comes with an unknown pandemic. In Denmark the entire society was locked down on March 11.

My Swedish and Danish colleagues and friends agree on one thing: that their political leaders have chosen the best strategy. Even today, with many more covid19 related deaths in Sweden than in Denmark, the Swedes still agree that their politicians have chosen the right strategy.

The covid19 crisis has shown a battle between different considerations, pulling in different directions. In the end, politicians have to make the difficult decisions. But voter support, economic stability and scientific evidence have different dynamics and time horizons, and in a new situation, nothing is for sure. Epidemologists call for evidence, patience and a longterm perspective, arguing for at least twelve months to develop a vaccine, warning politicians that opening up societies too early may create a second wave of infections and deaths. At the same time business managers and economists argue desperately for opening up markets as soon as possible, warning that a stressed economy may lead to a depression and result in more deaths and more suffering than the corona virus has caused itself.

Politicians have to balance these legitimate considerations. Whether they chose the Swedish or the Danish approach, they will have to set aside differences and agree on a way forward. This cannot be done in an objective manner, liberating politicians from responsibility. Without being subjective, emotional or personal, politics is the territory of the non-objective. What will be interesting to see, is how the world’s top politicians will handle their new moment of authority for immediate local and longterm global prosperity. And how the return of the state will be used to set aside or reinforce national differences.

Sartre, Jean Paul (1976). *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. London: New Left Books. p. 742