

Issue Three

# Locke, Hegel, and Covid-19

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The most important lesson from the world's experience with Covid-19 can be summarized with a philosophical slogan: We talk Locke, we act Hegel. Or, to rephrase it in less academic terms: The People's Republic of China is setting the global ideological agenda. I will try to explain all that and also say something about the implications of this New Worldly Order for Christians.

First, though, I need to offer a “trigger warning” for people who have not been traumatized by the standard response to this pandemic: the lockdowns, mandatory social distancing, and lengthy bans on numerous social activities generally considered essential to the good life—education and worship, for example. This article is likely to irritate and confuse all people who accept what I call the “heroic narrative” of the anti-Covid adventure.

Let me be clear about that narrative. I understand that shutting down much of most societies for months, widening the gaps between rich and poor, suspending democratic processes, and creating a children's mental health crisis is widely thought to be heroic: tough but necessary. I accept that all the unprecedented restrictions on normal lives may have delayed a fair number of deaths, as their supporters claim.

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However, no one sensible can deny that these measures did a great deal of harm: from increasing obesity to depriving Catholics of many of the sacraments, from delaying romances to increasing child abuse. If the politicians and public health professionals who have supervised these measures were willing to talk about the balance of goods and evils in a coherent way, I would listen. I am potentially willing to be persuaded that the temporary authoritarian re-ordering of almost everyone's lives was truly justified.

The potential has not been actualized. One basic fact about this response is that almost no one in the circles of power has offered anything like a comprehensive social-ethical analysis, and almost no one close to those circles has asked for one. No one is even willing to provide a reasonable explanation for the near-universal decision to keep ignoring the World Health Organization's 2019 recommendation to keep life close to normal during influenza pandemics.

In other words, the most extensive peacetime restrictions on daily life in history have been endorsed unquestioningly by almost everyone with power and influence. The enthusiasm for novel, life-limiting

measures remains high as I write this. Vaccine rules that effectively exclude a substantial portion of the population from daily life are being introduced in many countries.

The uncritical silence in the face of such restrictions needs to be explained. I believe that there are many things going on, from groupthink, mass hysteria, and power-hungry politicians to resurgent purity cults, biopolitics, and a search for René Girard's scapegoats. One item on the list of explanations is the exhaustion of the liberal political project. That is the subject of this article.

Intellectually, the first part of the tale can be told as the story of two Johns, Locke and Rawls. Both the 17th-century political philosopher and the 20th-century one have academic industries surrounding them, so I need to acknowledge straight away that I am simplifying massively. I freely admit that Locke was not really a Lockean and that Rawls spent decades trying to mend the holes in his theory.

Still, there is a clear vision that comes out of their shared philosophical tradition. It is democratic: the people should find ways to rule themselves justly. It is tolerant: with a few exceptions, people should be left to adopt their own ideas and construct their own private lives. It is individualistic: membership in all organizations, from families to nations, should be as voluntary as can be managed. And it is pluralistic: we cannot be expected to agree on the truth, so we should expect many different truth-claims to co-exist in a society, and we should be happy about that.

The vision is more idealistic than realistic. As any Christian might notice, there is no room for sin in the Lockean state. It cannot deal well with the selfish people who band together to take over democracies. It does not recognize that angry people do not easily tolerate fools or that some people and ideas are intolerable in any society. It also ignores the fact that societies always have some sort of hierarchical structures, so, roughly speaking, if they do not have extended families and churches, they will have bureaucratic corporations and governments.

Besides, as scores of authors have pointed out for more than a century, too much individualism and too little belonging and believing is bad for people. A Lockean paradise would be filled with alienation, depression, despair, and, as a result, violence and fear. Life might be long and comfortable, but it would be deeply miserable. Those critical authors, from Émile Durkheim to Byung-Chul Han, point out that we are all too close to living in the bleakness of Locke's social contract and Rawls's veil of ignorance.

For all that, we still talk Locke (and Rawls). Catholic bishops routinely praise democracy, academics discuss endlessly the fine point of the varieties and, occasionally, the limits of pluralism, and judges and journalists treat tolerance of personal freedom as if it were the bedrock of our social structures. When governments push people around—I will come back to that tendency in a minute—they invariably claim that they are doing it to promote other people's freedom to think and do what they want. The defenders of abortion, for instance, talk about an individual's right to choose as if that were always and everywhere an obviously good thing.

Abortion is legal in most of the world, but for the most part, the Locke-talk is empty. Democracies have little popular appeal, societies have well-defined and quite narrow bounds of tolerance, pluralism is largely mythical, and our governments are domineering about pretty much everything. The last is crucial for my argument, so consider the scope of governmental authority. Rulers and official bureaucracies now largely control (in alphabetical order) agriculture, education, employment, environmental emissions, healthcare, medical ethics, money and finance, retirement, sexual mores, telecommunications, urban planning, and welfare programs to relieve misery and want.

Meanwhile, the media increasingly follows some government line, and organized religion has been

relegated to the periphery of the public consciousness. Lockean individuals can freely participate in civil society and the public square, but always within the limits set by, and generally under the guidance of, huge governmental systems.

Whatever people and pundits may say, few of them seem really to mind living in this non-Lockean world. The pandemic is a good test case. If there were much genuine interest in the principles of Locke and Rawls, then the imposition of anti-Covid rules would have been met with massive protests against the domineering governments.

I might exaggerate. Perhaps the initial “state of exception” (to invoke the distinctly anti-Lockean philosopher Carl Schmitt) would have been accepted—it was a health crisis, after all. However, any true Lockean would soon have been crying out for a reversal, or at least an urgent reckoning of the measures’ wide harms against their narrowly medical benefits.

I’m sure that defenders of the heroic anti-Covid narrative can find ways to reconcile their unquestioning acceptance of authoritarian rule with their underlying liberal Lockean principles. Indeed, I am sure they are sincere about not seeing a contradiction between the two views. They cannot see the irony of complaining about President Trump’s attacks on the democratic process and spirit while asking for more executive orders to mandate masks, vaccines, and whatever restrictions on Lockean freedoms the government deems medically advisable.

Their intellectual complacency deserves to be criticized, but, more importantly, it deserves to be explained. This is where G. W. F. Hegel comes in. As with Locke (and Rawls), I am not talking about the Hegel of the scholars or about the many varieties of Hegelian thought. When I say that we “act Hegel,” I am referring to one of several available interpretations of his philosophy of history.

Hegel saw what he thought was the ineluctable development of freedom through history, as the Spirit became more manifest. In the beginning (the first “moment,” as he put it), freedom was constrained by the arbitrary rules of family and tribe, and by the darkness of ignorance and irrational religion. In these primitive societies, the individual was lost in the group, and everyone lived in fear and ignorance.

At the end of history (roughly the third moment), the completed State will express the full freedom of the Spirit. All the “willfulness” of individuals and of the organizations of their civil societies will be eliminated. Everyone will share the same Spirit, which the State will articulate flawlessly. This ideal and rational Spirit will take the place of revealed religion, and each individual will be fully free—in the identity of his desires and decisions with those willed by the State.

Hegel thought this unified end of history was fairly near, but he underestimated the resistance of willful individuals. To get closer to the goal, the leading ideologues of Hegelian politics, scientific socialists and secular totalitarians, have felt themselves obliged to liquidate significant portions of the population.

With the exception of the Chinese Communists—I will come back to them—these governments have not been able to stay in power. Even great wars, which Hegel strongly approved of, have not managed to create the sort of unity that he envisaged.

The failures are heartening to Christians, but also to Lockeans. In the Lockean model, what Hegel saw as historically retrograde willfulness is considered the apex of freedom. The variety of individual wills supports democratic capitalism, the uneasy consensus of liberal democracies, and a healthy pluralism of lifestyles and beliefs.

However, any gloating over the historical record is premature. As Hegel pointed out, history is cunning. The failure of would-be full-on Hegelian governments is not necessarily a sign that his vision was mistaken. As I pointed out earlier, while people still talk Locke, they increasingly act Hegel. Few of us live under regimes as openly violent as those of the 20th-century totalitarians, but what then-Cardinal Ratzinger called “the dictatorship of relativism” takes the political form of proto-Hegelian states.

Lockean life is not extinguished. Governments permit fairly large morsels of pluralism and liberal debate—*Humanum* is allowed to publish this article, for example. However, serious deviations from the State’s definition of freedom—freedom of choice, love, business practices, careers, and historical narratives—are marginalized and, as the State deems necessary, punished.

When I say “the State,” I do not primarily mean the politicians, although they have a role to play, often in public relations. What is most important, and here I am thinking more of Max Weber than of Hegel, is the whole bureaucratic apparatus and its extensive webs of law, regulation, taxation, and benefits. These webs reach into every aspect of life. They do that at least as thoroughly as the tribal authorities in Hegel’s first historical moment. The difference, from the State’s perspective, is that the authority then was willful and allowed for exceptions; now it is rational and uniform.

Of course, proto-Hegelian rationality is quite different from the Christian idea of the divine Logos—reason who provides a heaven-oriented order for sin-filled human lives and history. Hegel thought the two rationalities would converge (Christianity would be synthesized into the Spirit), but he did not really take into account how badly the bureaucratic variety is always contaminated with sin.

Christians can explain. As history advances, sin abounds. With grace absent from the Hegelian model, sin can super-abound (cf. Romans 5:20).

And that brings me back to the standard global response to Covid-19. What does a Hegelian see in a pandemic? The same thing he sees in every challenge and every sort of suffering: a call to unify individual wills with the State-defined uniform good. In this case, the State-defined primal good was life, the primal freedom was to be alive. So the State had to control life to liberate it. It was obliged to use its extensive bureaucracies to limit the ways people were allowed to love and flourish. It simply had to restrict life as much as, and for as long as, was necessary to bring the irrational viral invader under the administrative State’s beneficent control.

This telling might sound alarmist. Our societies, after all, will return to something close to pre-pandemic normal life. In England, where I live, that condition has almost arrived. In the heroic narrative, the state of exception is described as an unfortunately necessary interlude, a temporary break in Lockean normalcy. The damage done can mostly be repaired, and with our newfound power over nature, we can hope to avoid imposing such measures in the future.

This narrative is inadequate. It neither questions nor explains the initial and continuing decision to act Hegel. More importantly, it ignores the reality that the abandonment of the accepted response to viral pandemics showed a clear advance of history in a Hegelian direction.

This direction was widely welcomed. The measures were adopted and maintained with far more enthusiasm than regret by leading centrist and liberal politicians, including Joe Biden, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, and Justin Trudeau. In most countries, opposition politicians complained only that the measures were not tough enough.

The full force of government propaganda was unleashed for the cause. The mainstream media eagerly

participated. The campaign of fear and authorized science found a ready audience among the people. Opinion polls suggest vast support for the durable restrictions of Lockean freedoms.

The support points to a hard truth—hard at least for the Lockean and Rawlsian political theorists. We act Hegel for a good reason: because for most people the pluralistic society always sits somewhere between the impossible and the unbearable. When times are fairly peaceful, we can tolerate many things, but we are always haunted by fears, despair, and imperfectly controlled antipathy to dissenters. When there is a crisis, society moves to the unbearable side of the continuum. It is time for popular hysteria, harsh restrictions, and unity in intolerance.

Humans are social creatures—they need commitments and communities to thrive. With Lockean freedom, they are on their own. Humans have a natural craving for a transcendental anchor to their lives—with Lockean pluralism, they are adrift. In both peaceful times and crises, the Hegelian State is a poor substitute for a Christian polity built on communion and truth. Still, obedient unity with the State is far more appealing than the emptiness offered by Lockean freedom.

It is now time to keep my promise to come back to China, or more precisely to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP has no lingering Lockean rhetoric. It is Hegelian to the core. I like to quote the explanation of the role of government that a visiting Chinese student gave a few years ago to a friend of mine, a bewildered American professor of politics. “The government is responsible for protecting the country from disorder.”

That is what the authorities in Beijing try to do. For a still relatively poor country, their administrative state is remarkably efficient and intrusive. A state of exception is often present and always imminent. Any potential disorder, for example from Uyghur Muslims, is re-educated away with cruel vigor.

China is the vanguard of Hegelian history. So, it is not surprising that the global anti-Covid agenda comes out of Beijing. All of it—the tight restrictions, the intense propaganda, the reverence for “science,” the disregard of individual suffering—were trialed in China in the early spring of 2020. At first, Western leaders made some Lockean statements about how their people would not accept such restrictions, but within weeks they had been enticed by the siren song of Hegelian freedom.

What is the lesson in all this for Christians? After the disaster of the Second World War, many believers and their leaders thought they could make peace with Locke. Among many other things, the Second Vatican Council offered a sort of conditional love letter to Lockean notions of freedom, social equality, and individual autonomy. The Magisterial endorsement has never been more than half-hearted, but, as Pius XII recognized in his Christmas addresses during that war, the only available alternative, proto-Hegelian dictatorships, was much worse.

Many Christians are still looking for a live-and-let-live settlement with the Lockean political authorities. Americans cite the Constitution and Europeans point back to the region’s religious heritage and to the Enlightenment’s respect for conscience.

Whether that quest ever made sense may be a good topic for discussion, but the conversation is now pointless. Christians have no Lockean interlocutor. They face only proto-Hegelian authorities: bureaucrats and politicians whose ideology has no room for any religion that is not either totally relegated to the private sphere or totally loyal to the State’s controlling agenda. The Lockean colloquiums may continue in universities and think-tanks, but when action is deemed necessary, the governments’ deeds are Hegelian and the people as a whole happily go along.

During the pandemic, Christian leaders firmly chose the second acceptable alternative condition of religious acceptability. They rushed to demonstrate their loyalty to the governments' agenda and the heroic narrative that surrounded it. As a tactic in a difficult time, that choice might be defensible. As a Christian witness to the human calling to love and the fullness of life, it was, in my judgment, inadequate.

If the heroic narrative is right, then my judgment can only be of historical interest, in the Lockean sense of historical as something free people have outgrown. The authorities say that they do not want to repeat the anti-Covid state of exception. They explain that this desire motivates the extension of the state of exception to the rules surrounding vaccines.

However, for Hegelians, historical interest looks forwards as well as backwards. Yesterday's exceptional additions to governmental control are often tomorrow's normal unification of State and individual. History is cunning that way.

In that case, Christians need to do better. They can start by not simply accepting governments' judgments of what science says. More importantly, they should remember that the fullness of life consists of far more than being alive. In the face of a pandemic, as in the face of persecution, sometimes you have to give up your life to save it.

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