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**Title:** Covid politics : Morality and Solidarities in a State of Exception

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Eskelinen, T. (2021). Covid politics : Morality and Solidarities in a State of Exception. *European Sociologist*, 2021(46). <https://www.europeansociologist.org/issue-46-pandemic-impossibilities-vol-2/covid-politics-morality-and-solidarities-state-exception>

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# Covid politics – Morality and Solidarities in a State of Exception

ISSUE 46: PANDEMIC (IM)POSSIBILITIES VOL. 2 SAT 1 MAY 2021 0

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Social organisation and collective moral beliefs have been widely studied, but almost invariably in the context of “normality” – that is, in a context devoid of disruptions. Yet this approach becomes insufficient as we move into a global risk society. Complex and intertwined ecological, social and economic fragilities force the question: how do we organise for a better life in moments of crises and disruptions?

Amongst possible forms of disruptions, the ongoing pandemic seems to have taken most of us by surprise. Imagining ecological collapses had become almost routine, yet it was difficult to foresee governments suddenly imposing states of exception because of a public health crisis, or a crisis causing large scale social distancing. Yet questions relevant to any crisis context apply. How does the community organise and express self-control? How do people express solidarities? How do the relations between governments and civil society evolve? Below, I will discuss these issues briefly from the perspective of personal observations from Helsinki, Finland.

## Emerging solidarities

As the state of exception abruptly began and the seriousness of the situation began to dawn on us, an immediate reaction of masses of people was an outburst of solidarity. An almost instinctive reaction of many seemed to be to seek to help not only those immediately close, but the surrounding neighbourhood. Most visibly, paper slips offering assistance with grocery shopping to those too frail or scared to leave their apartments appeared in doorways of apartment buildings. The “social distancing” measures thereby immediately generated their reverse, creating connections of solidarity between people routinely distanced from each other in everyday urban life.

Online reading groups emerged, and *The Plague* by Albert Camus [1] seemed to many minds to be the to-the-point novel for this moment of time. Camus’ existentialist classic is applauded for its description of humane morality amidst a lethal epidemic. Empowering symbolic ideas of responding-as-a-community were sought in the news in addition to literature, and indeed the most shared communications from abroad seemed to be not about clinical issues, but expressions of community spirit: the Italian balcony singers, the German gift gates, and so forth.

Interestingly, existing cultural ideas about behaviour in a crisis point in a quite different direction. Especially dystopian fiction depicts catastrophes as moments in which social relations break down and the human being turns into a “Hobbesian man”, preoccupied with personal survival. This Hobbesian assumption, added to economic ideas of “rationality”, is indeed so deep, that the spontaneous compassion and improvised mutual aid seemed to cause a sense of surprise, even relief.

But neither narrative is straightforwardly correct or false; rather we see an implicit contest over the hegemonic narrative. Importantly, such narratives are also highly performative: they not only describe, but direct human conduct. This also creates responsibility over enforcing a narrative. In addition to all expressions of solidarity, the early days of the state of exception were filled with sights and stories of hoarding. As hilarious as the stories of the toilet paper shoppers were, it is worth asking whether these stories enforce selfish patterns of conduct?

Solidarity enforces further solidarity and is both symbolically and practically important. But this does not yet say much about the broad impact of these commendable actions. The spontaneous civil society did reach far beyond its typical scope: for example, we saw a large number of initiatives to assist entrepreneurs, artists, and freelancers. The question remains, though, as to what the limits of the extension of such solidarity are. It became clear from the outset that the

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pandemic response would have a huge impact on the homeless, drug addicts, and former addicts in rehabilitation, victims of domestic violence, handicapped people who require assistance, schoolchildren in need of special attention, and so forth. But it is not clear if “the community” has the moral and practical means to mobilise in support of such groups. Also it clearly does not have tools of governance: MPs called for an impact assessment of the social distancing measures in terms of basic rights and social consequences, but such a form of rationality is clearly beyond the scope of the organising community.

An external shock always causes uneven burden sharing. As disquieting as it is, social divisions appear to be rapidly deepening, despite all the existing goodwill and solidarity. This is not only a matter related to the situation of the margins of the immediate community. The shock to the world’s poorest will be massive [2], but does not receive much attention, and refugee solidarity, a heightened issue just two months ago, is almost completely wiped off the agenda. The organising community can also turn out to be a community preoccupied with what happens within itself.

### Morality and moral confusion

As the spontaneous civil society and the government undergo a reconsideration of their roles, the government’s role is not restricted to universalism and welfare services. Its presence is felt now much more than usually. But this presence does not mean formal control, such as having a larger number of police officers in the streets. The government’s presence is felt by moral norms coming directly from it. The public expresses a heightened ethos of obedience to authority, and disobedience to regulations is met with very strong moral condemnation. Government regulations are not merely formally enforced, but come into force by very strong peer pressure.

Morality is a method of the society to express collective self-control. People generally reacted to the sudden unfolding of a public health crisis with strong expressions of what they saw as acceptable and condemnable conduct. Collective responsibilities were assumed and translated into ideas of responsible individual conduct. While the authorities have acted as cool planning bureaucrats, with rationalities focused on population-level statistical modelling, the rationality of their subjects is very much based on moral assessments of individual conduct.

Yet following the assumed collective responsibilities as individuals means overturning the bases of everyday morality. Conduct is assessed in terms of potential outcomes of actions, rather than their actual outcomes. The connection between causality and responsibility is perhaps the deepest assumption of everyday morality, yet it is suddenly replaced with an “as if” and “could be” form of morality. A single Austrian bartender might be causally responsible for the spread of the pandemic all over Europe, but the actions of anyone going to work with a minor cold are to be seen as morally equally irresponsible, even if nothing in fact is caused by them.

No wonder that the morally responding society appears confused. People are very keen to alter their conduct and publicly assess the conduct of others. But should the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior be drawn to acting according to formal regulations, or should people go beyond these? What does minimising social contacts practically mean? The norm of social distancing consists of both explicit legislation (e.g. gatherings of over 10 people are not allowed), and recommendations (refrain from non-essential contacts). The latter leave the responsibility over interpretation to individuals. For instance, day care and lower grade schooling remains open for children of parents who cannot reasonably organise home care, but no-one has any conclusive definition of “reasonable”, not even the administration that really tried. Nevertheless, taking children to day care is clearly a cause for embarrassment, a topic one prefers to avoid.

The room for interpretation also means that conduct alone does not reveal whether a person is acting responsibly or not, or if they are doing their share in social distancing. This adds to the moral confusion. In a contemporary complex society, different life situations are numerous. These situations include not only work and family structure, but also economic conditions, social problems, mental health – the list goes on. As much as a society in a pandemic needs self-control, the idea of expecting uniform conduct from everyone is a social justice nightmare. Forgetting this fact leads very easily to moral panics, as reporting on apparently irresponsible behaviour causes outrage. Columnists have to remind people carried away by the urge for moral condemnation that more than two adults visibly walking close to each other can make an atypical family rather than “a gathering”. Journalists report on people packing into a supermarket offering discounts, causing moral outrage, but how are we to know whether they are motivated by carelessness or poverty?

Furthermore, not only the actions of people, but also their reactions to unforeseen circumstances, vary. A threat to the emerging new solidarities are the apparently common angry sentiments towards reactions to the distressing situation that deviate from one’s own mode of reaction. Clearly some people reacted to the shock caused by the pandemic by seeking all possible information and flooding mailing lists and social media with it, while some played it



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cool and emphasised day in and day out how life goes on, and others appeared to cope with very dark humour. All these reactions are potentially very irritating to others. Even apparently reckless behaviour can, for some, be a coping strategy. Avoiding quick moral reactions and expressing empathy towards various coping strategies can clearly be very demanding, yet necessary for retaining solidarities.

### Endnote

The form of the ongoing crisis has been a surprise to most, but what emerged first is a community responding in solidarity, refuting the strongest of Hobbesian assumptions. Yet contrary to the most optimistic communitarian ideals of a community response, the government has played a significant role in the moral response to the crisis, extending to determining everyday ideas of responsible behavior.

The key issue to understand in a moment of disruption is how does the community react and organise collectively. The response of the community has consisted of extended solidarities, translating the government response into individual morality and moral control, and using morality as a tool of self-control. But moral control comes with its own problems: not only is it a necessary tool for the community to adapt to the new situation, it can also be a cause of moral panics and outrage based on quick assumptions.

Technically, normal life resumes after the state of exception, but there is never a return to exactly the same state as before. Beliefs, relations and organisations of various sorts will be affected. The moments of negotiation that determine what will come out of the crisis still lie ahead. But we can already see some forms of what could remain from these times, and it is not unimportant whether the dominant narrative of today is a narrative of solidarities or panic hoarding. Most importantly, it is necessary to understand organisation and morality in exceptional times, because there are more of these to come.

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[1] Camus, A. (1991) *The plague*. French original La Peste 1947. Penguin.

[2] Sumner, A.; Hoy, C. & Ortiz-Juarez, E. (2020) *Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty*. UNU-WIDER Working Paper. UNU-WIDER.

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