

Why There is a Civic and Moral Duty to Oppose Tyrannical Bureaucracies

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The searing Russian novel *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman is one of the greatest examinations of totalitarianism ever written. Based on his experiences under Stalin, Grossman depicts how humanity withers under tyranny. Grossman's book is not a dystopian novel, yet few books better teach how force is used to control a population by not only restricting liberty but also exploiting weaknesses in human nature.

Along a flank of the Stalingrad front, two colonels talk about the terrible impact of bureaucrats and bureaucracy. One colonel tells this story:

There was an infantry detachment that had been surrounded. The men had nothing to eat. A squadron was ordered to drop them some food by parachute. And then the quartermaster refused to issue the food. He said he needed a signature on the delivery slip and how could the men down below sign for what had been dropped by parachute? And he wouldn't budge. Finally he received an order from above.

The other colonel says, "Bureaucracy can be much more terrifying than that." He then shares this story:

Remember the order: 'Not one step back'? There was one place where the Germans were mowing our men down by the hundred. All we needed to do was withdraw over the brow of the hill. Strategically, it would have made no difference – and we'd have saved our men and equipment. But the orders were "Not one step back." And so the men perished and their equipment was destroyed.

The conversation continues, and then Grossman has one colonel deliver the punchline: "What's really terrifying is when you realize that bureaucracy isn't simply a growth on the body of the State. If it were only that, it could be cut off. No, bureaucracy is the very essence of the State."

The forces making bureaucracy arbitrary, capricious, and impervious to reason—"the very essence of the State"—are the same in America as they were in Grossman's Soviet Union. We all have our stories of bureaucratic indifference; and now during Covid, indifference has become cruel. Just ask the relatives of former Governor Cuomo's nursing home victims or the former "health angels" who gained natural immunity and now face termination for refusing the vaccine mandate.

In his book Bureaucracy, Ludwig von Mises explains, "The ultimate basis of an all-around bureaucratic system is violence." As for the bureaucrats making the rules, Mises observes, "He who is unfit to serve his fellow citizens wants to rule them."

Today, has Grossman's World War II "not one step back" become "if it saves one life?"

Egyppius is a pseudonymous critic of Covid policies. He recently explored how the "not one step back" mindset has shaped Covid policy:

All containment policies, since March 2020, flow from two fundamental premises, that together form a Pandemic Doctrine: 1) All pandemic infections are regrettable and to be prevented. 2) It is possible to control pandemics via social or medical technology." "Before 2020, nobody anywhere believed either of these things—not despite, *but because of* long experience with semi-regular pandemic influenza outbreaks.

Egyppius explores the motives of the "autonomous undirected actions of a million nameless, faceless bureaucrats, which nobody can any longer control:"

Everything since then, has been the autonomous force of the Pandemic Doctrine and its terrible demands. As containment policies have failed, one after the other, they have left a vortex of disconfirmed expectancy in their wake, turning early political and bureaucratic advocates of containment into truly deranged zealots. The policies themselves, though they are articles of faith, have little or no real-world effect, and this has had curious consequences. It became important for all countries to do as many useless things as possible, and more or less the same useless things as everyone else. Bureaucracies that rejected a specific measure risked being blamed for whatever happened next. And without controls, the failure of containment could be rewritten always and forever as success: ‘Imagine how many more deaths we would have had, if we never locked down.

San Francisco bureaucrats demand that 5-year-old children be vaccinated in order to be admitted to indoor places. Will parents of tall 4-year-old children have to carry birth certificates to prove that their child isn’t five? School bureaucrats demand special needs children with breathing issues be placed in plexiglass cubicles.

On a Federal level, OSHA bureaucrats issue rules that contain a new cadre of inspectors empowered to level \$13,600 per worker fines for those firms violating vaccine mandates; mandates that do nothing to control the spread of Covid.

As essential services continue to deteriorate and shelves continue to empty, will bureaucrats change their guidelines? Egypptius predicts the Covid totalitarian toothpaste “will never go back in the tube.”

Faced with this illiberal onslaught from politicians and bureaucrats, it seems there is little we can do but weep in despair. After all, you might reason, what can one person do? Mises is clear: such a defeatist mindset forfeits your civic duties.

Bureaucracy was written in 1944, and of course, Mises had nothing to say about the Covid bureaucracy. However, his advice on opposing the socialist bureaucracy is applicable today.

Lesson 1: Oppose bureaucrats with vigor but avoid name-calling.

Mises explored the “propaganda trick” of those promoting socialism in Western countries. Promoters of socialism “extol the blessings which socialism has in store for mankind... [but] they have never attempted to prove their fallacious dogmas or still less to refute the objections raised by the economists.” Instead, they “call their adversaries names and... cast suspicion upon their motives.”

Today, politicians and bureaucrats use the same strategy to besmirch opponents of failed Covid policies. Has anything changed since Mises observed, “The average citizen cannot see through these stratagems?”

If you are swayed by propaganda that encourages *us vs them* name-calling, you are being manipulated to turn towards the darkest corners of your mind.

Lesson 2: Encourage others to broaden their reading and listening beyond the orthodoxy.

To combat socialism, Mises recommended economic studies as a civic duty. One does not have to become an economist to see through propaganda. Mises explains,

Only a man conversant with the main problems of economics is in a position to form an independent opinion on the problems involved. All the others are merely repeating what they have picked up by the way. They are an easy prey to demagogic swindlers and idiotic quacks. Their gullibility is the most serious menace to the preservation of democracy and to Western civilization.

Mises clarified, “The aim of the popularization of economic studies is not to make every man an economist. The idea is to equip the citizen for his civic functions in community life.” “It is hopeless,” Mises warned, “to stop the trend toward bureaucratization by the mere expression of indignation and by a nostalgic glorification of the good old times.”

Applying this lesson today, you don’t have to be a physician or epidemiologist to become conversant with basic Covid issues. Official propaganda might claim this is a pandemic of the unvaccinated, that natural immunity doesn’t exist, and your 5-year-old child urgently needs a Covid vaccination, but you can look at the evidence for yourself.

Lesson 3: Oppose all censorship

Propaganda, Mises alerts us, “is one of the worst evils of bureaucracy.” Propaganda is full of “lies, fallacies, and superstitions.” Mises adds these prescient words: “The liars must be afraid of truth and are therefore driven to suppress its pronouncement... Lenin and Hitler knew very well why they abolished freedom of thought, speech, and the press, and why they closed the frontiers of their countries to any import of ideas from abroad.”

No matter where you stand on a Covid issue, freedom and scientific progress depend on your opposition to the censorship of opposing views. Censors in America are not driven by better motivations than Stalin, Hitler, or Mao. Censors want to abolish critical thinking and pave the way for the imposition, without opposition, of any program they deem necessary.

Lesson 4: Oppose rule by elites

If Covid bureaucrats have run wild, “gullible citizenry” is to blame: “The plain citizens are mistaken in complaining that the bureaucrats have arrogated powers; they themselves and their mandatories have abandoned their sovereignty. Their ignorance of fundamental problems of economics has made the professional specialists supreme.” Mises warned against rule by elite “experts:”

But democracy becomes impracticable if the eminent citizens, the intellectual leaders of the community, are not in a position to form their own opinion on the basic social, economic, and political principles of policies. If the citizens are under the intellectual hegemony of the bureaucratic professionals, society breaks up into two castes: the ruling professionals, the Brahmins, and the gullible citizenry. Then despotism emerges, whatever the wording of constitutions and laws may be.

Mises ends his book with this instruction:

How can people determine their own affairs if they are too indifferent to gain through their own thinking an independent judgment on fundamental political and economic problems? Democracy is not a good that people can enjoy without trouble. It is, on the contrary, a treasure that must be daily defended and conquered anew by strenuous effort.

Watching CNN or Fox and then repeating “They say...” is not the strenuous effort Mises suggested. Mises would warn against dismissing brave voices diligently questioning the orthodoxy. Entrepreneur Steve Kirsch is just one example of a courageous voice who some would dismiss as not being a trained health professional. You can come to a different conclusion.

If we have a civic duty to learn about immunity, pandemics, and health, we also have an equally important moral duty.

Lesson 5: We have a moral duty to see the humanity in others

Recently I was speaking to a physician friend whose politics are progressive but who sees himself as holding liberal values. I mentioned how disturbed I was about the ongoing demonization by bureaucrats and politicians of those who have chosen not to be vaccinated. The physician said this is indeed regrettable, but he chastised me: “I must understand the context, those doing the demonization are trying to save lives.” Although this doctor himself had suffered a significant vaccine injury from the 2009 H1N1 vaccine, he then recited the bureaucratic propaganda for current vaccine policies. To keep his standing in the medical community, he carefully weighs the dangers to his career of stepping too far away from the official narrative. He cares about patients, yet the ties of his medical tribe compromise his judgment.

If you say *I must feed my family, I cannot oppose mandates*; no one will fault you. If you say, *I have no time to study the issue and make my own judgment*, you can still take a moral stand against coercing and demonizing others. You can stand for the humanity in each person and eschew tribal hatreds. There is no need to harass others by cooperating with petty bureaucrats.

In his best-known work, *I and Thou*, the Vienna-born philosopher Martin Buber observed two fundamental ways of seeing the world: “I-Thou” or “I-It.” Through the “I-It” lens, others are seen as less than us, either as objects who help us or obstacles that get in our way. Tribalism, at its core, looks at the world through “I-It” eyes.

In the great Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky tells of Fyodor Pavlovitch, who desires to “revenge himself on everyone for his own unseemliness.” Pavlovitch remembers being asked, “Why do you hate so and so, so much?” Pavlovitch had responded, “I’ll tell you. He has done me no harm. But I played him a dirty trick, and ever since I have hated him.”

Today, those we once called angels, health care professionals, airline employees, first responders, grocery store cashiers who served us while others worked at home over Zoom are having “dirty tricks” played against them. If they refuse mandates, they are fired.

It is human nature to experience dissonance when we behave poorly. Notice a moment when you catch yourself seeing the world through “I-It” eyes, when you have failed to see the humanity in another. In the next moment you may notice there is an itch you need to scratch. The itch is a felt need to justify your “I-It” thinking. You may relieve the itch by cheering at a propagandistic pronouncement portraying the unvaccinated as a threat to you. *Phew*, you may think, *I’m not really a bad person; I’m just defending myself against those who would harm me.* In justifying “I-It” thinking, moral duty is abandoned.

We are now at a crossroads. How will we resolve our dissonance when we fail to see the humanity in others? One path is to scratch the need to feel innocent and virtuous. As Dostoevsky explained, we tend to become outraged at those we have harmed.

The other path is to resolve our dissonance by looking at our actions without justifying our actions. In that space, clarity and moral courage arise. Our civic and moral duty requires us to resist all inhumane demonizers professing that there is only one true way and that they are the keepers of that way.

In his seminal work, *Human Action*, Mises wrote, “A man who chooses between drinking a glass of milk and a glass of a solution of potassium cyanide does not choose between two beverages; he chooses between life and death. A society that chooses between capitalism and socialism does not choose between two social systems; it chooses between social cooperation and the disintegration of society.”

In the spirit of Mises, I offer this: A society that embraces coerced medical choices has chosen a path away from social cooperation and towards the disintegration of society.

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