

## Loss of the Middle

As the infection and death tolls mount on a worldwide scale, a new social condition seems to be thrust upon us. For those who work in medical care, there is an intense state of overwork and personal threat in which, I would suspect, an oscillation of somnambulism and panic prevails. But I am only imagining and I can say nothing about their actual condition. There are also the homeless and the poor, for whom social distancing is near impossible. In an unequal society, the effects of the pandemic will be unequal. But rather than attempt to speak of all of this at once, I want now to speak of those of us who have been counseled to maintain social distance and have some chance of doing so.

With such a counsel we have been asked to coordinate our personal decisions with an appreciation of the public condition and have thus been thrown back into a state of suspension, a time-out-of-time which is both isolating and yet has a certain world-consciousness. It is a new social condition and it is too early to see what changes it might bring or even whether, after the danger recedes, anything at all will have changed. Being this close to the phenomenon, reflections can't help but be tentative. Yet they are also essential as we battle to make some sense of our condition. It is too pressing to wait for the history books.

As the coronavirus spectre approached, we were either encouraged, or enjoined, or told, to maintain "social distancing" in order to "flatten the curve." These two phrases have now entered seamlessly into the vocabulary of the new condition. One immediate observation was that it is not *social* distancing that we need but *physical* distancing, provoking the further observation that physical distancing needs to go hand-in-hand with *social solidarity*. These timely observations bring to the fore what is newly elastic in the coronavirus times: the physical proximity that sustains the spatial and temporal dimensions of social life.

Our physical space has shrunk considerably. We stay at home and sally forth only occasionally for supplies, rushing to hole up again. When we do see friends or neighbours, we keep our distance of six feet. No hugs or kisses, no squeezes of the elbow or pats on the shoulder. Contraction of physical space means we are confined with family or living companions. Of course, use of electronic means of connection has ballooned as have social media in general. Taken together, this amounts to a disruption of the physical basis of social interaction. We usually participate in several modes at once: familial, live-with connection; small groups; public meetings and concerts; electronic communication; social media, etc.

In the first place it is a matter of a *contraction* from these multiple modes to a duality of familial, live-in, relations on one side and electronic, social media on the other. The loss of intermediate social groupings is a loss of what we normally experience as *direct social relations*. By this I mean that "social life" is experienced as beyond the intimacy of familial and live-in relations but lesser than the total social or political order. Our friends, co-workers, neighbours, are usually encountered in physical presence, occasionally not every day, in a semi-public world beyond the home but not at the level of the corporation, the state, or the global. This intermediate world has retreated in its physical presence and it is what is being re-constructed through electronic and social media. Suffice it to say that some people are left out and others newly included. Our groupings are being reconfigured as every medium poses new problems of access. They are being reconfigured in a new way—without touching and with lesser spontaneity. Only smaller groups seem capable of surviving in anything like the same form. A meeting of 25 people that takes place over Zoom or another platform replaces the group

interaction with either a one-by-one simulacrum or a cacophony . Even 6 are pushed into this form. It's not the same thing.

At the same time, we are closer to the overall public, state, global space than ever. At least in a reflective mode. When I decide to stay inside, it is my reflection on the global state of affairs, as well as how that it is playing out in still very large organizations like the province or the city, that motivates my behaviour. My decisions for interaction are both more reflective than normal and more oriented to the large-scale rather than the intermediate.

What are the prospects for social solidarity in this reconfigured setting for social interaction? In the first place, it is not so simple to oppose physical distancing to social solidarity. Our main experience of the social is normally with intermediate groups and it is through such intermediate groups that our feeling and actions of social solidarity are awakened. If we take it for granted that we normally first look after those to whom we are intimately connected, the shift to electronically mediated social groupings, alongside a reflective relation to the national and global, means that our previous feelings and actions of social solidarity are undermined. Perhaps people will retreat into concern only for their own intimate circle. Perhaps they will expand their sense of solidarity to those on a provincial, national or global scale. As is usual in these situations, it is likely that both will happen so that a refigured social tension between indifference and greater solidarity will appear.

Along with spatial changes there are also changes in one's experience of time. Physical isolation lends itself to a sort of time-out-of-time in which the hours blend into days and days into weeks without significant markers in the stream of time. Since the future after this period is still largely unknown, except that it will be different probably in some important ways, it is a time oriented to survival and hanging-on, not of planning or making long-term decisions. The short time of expectation and planning shifts radically our normal expectation of a future that can be projected to issue from the present. The future hovers like an unknown horizon rather than as a project for action. At the same time, there is more time for reflection, for distance from the demands of planning, so that one is thrown back upon one's own history and many people are spending more time trying to make sense of the past. Combined with the availability of electronic media, this may explain the renewal of connections to old friends and acquaintances. There may be some source of hope in this time for reflection.

The pushing-out of intermediate social relations is perhaps the locus of what may happen next. An undialectical counterposing of intimate, personal relations with those of the state was one of the classic features of fascism. But it need not go in that direction. Identification with global issues may be the basis for a new social solidarity. Redistribution of wealth and refortified social citizenship has historically been a main consequence of war. Coronavirus danger and isolation may be the moral equivalent of war in our time.