

We Are Living Through a Time of Fear - Not Just of the Virus, but of Each Other

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, December 05, 2021

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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This incisive and timely article by award winning author **Jonathan Cook** was published on March 24, 2021,

Welcome to the age of fear. Nothing is more corrosive of the democratic impulse than fear. Left unaddressed, it festers, eating away at our confidence and empathy.

We are now firmly in a time of fear – not only of the virus, but of each other. Fear destroys solidarity. Fear forces us to turn inwards to protect ourselves and our loved ones. Fear refuses to understand or identify with the concerns of others.

In fear societies, basic rights become a luxury. They are viewed as a threat, as recklessness, as a distraction that cannot be afforded in this moment of crisis.

Once fear takes hold, populations risk agreeing to hand back rights, won over decades or centuries, that were the sole, meagre limit on the power of elites to ransack the common wealth. In calculations based on fear, freedoms must make way for other priorities: being responsible, keeping safe, averting danger.

Worse, rights are surrendered with our consent because we are persuaded that the rights themselves are a threat to social solidarity, to security, to our health.

‘Too noisy’ protests

It is therefore far from surprising that the UK’s draconian new Police and Crime Bill – concentrating yet more powers in the police – has arrived at this moment. It means that the police can prevent non-violent protest that is likely to be [too noisy](#) or might create “unease” in bystanders. Protesters risk being charged with a crime if they cause “[nuisance](#)” or set up protest encampments in public places, as the Occupy movement did a decade ago.

And damaging memorials – totems especially prized in a time of fear for their power to ward off danger – could land protesters, like those who [toppled a statue](#) to notorious slave trader **Edward Colston** in Bristol last summer, a 10-year jail sentence.

- Gypsy & Traveller vehicles to be seized;
- 3 months jail or £2.5k fine for a nomadic life without a travellers passport;
- Banning of “disruptive” protests;
- Up to 10 years jail for damage to a statue;

Dangerous, totalitarian legislation.

— Howard Beckett (@BeckettUnite) [March 15, 2021](#)

In other words, this is a bill designed to outlaw the right to conduct any demonstration beyond the most feeble and ineffective kind. It makes permanent current, supposedly extraordinary limitations on protest that were designed, or so it was said, to protect the public from the immediate threat of disease.

Protest that demands meaningful change is always noisy and disruptive. Would the suffragettes have won women the vote without causing inconvenience and without offending vested interests that wanted them silent?

What constitutes too much noise or public nuisance? In a time of permanent pandemic, it is whatever detracts from the all-consuming effort to extinguish our fear and insecurity. When we are afraid, why should the police not be able to snatch someone off the street for causing “unease”?

The UK bill is far from unusual. Similar legislation – against noisy, inconvenient and disruptive protest – is being passed in states across the United States. Just as free speech is being shut down on the grounds that we must not offend, so protest is being shut down on the grounds that we must not disturb.

From the outbreak of the virus, there were those who warned that the pandemic would soon serve as a pretext to take away basic rights and make our societies less free. Those warnings soon got submerged in, or drowned out by, much wilder claims, such as that the virus was a hoax or that it was similar to flu, or by the libertarian clamour against lockdowns and mask-wearing.

Binary choices

What was notable was the readiness of the political and media establishments to intentionally conflate and confuse reasonable and unreasonable arguments to discredit all dissent and lay the groundwork for legislation of this kind.

The purpose has been to force on us unwelcome binary choices. We are either in favour of all lockdowns or indifferent to the virus’ unchecked spread. We are either supporters of enforced vaccinations or insensitive to the threat the virus poses to the vulnerable. We are either responsible citizens upholding the rules without question or selfish oafs who are putting everyone else at risk.

A central fracture line has opened up – in part a generational one – between those who are most afraid of the virus and those who are most afraid of losing their jobs, of isolation and loneliness, of the damage being done to their children’s development, of the end of a way of life they valued, or of the erasure of rights they hold inviolable.

The establishment has been sticking its crowbar into that split, trying to prise it open and turn us against each other.

'Kill the Bill'

Where this heads was only too visible in the UK at the weekend when protesters took to the streets of major cities. They did so – in another illustration of binary choices that now dominate our lives – in violation of emergency Covid regulations banning protests. There was a large [march](#) through central London, while another demonstration ended in [clashes](#) between protesters and police in Bristol.

What are the protesters – most peaceful, a few not – trying to achieve? In the media, all protest at the moment is misleadingly lumped together as “anti-lockdown”, appealing to the wider public’s fear of contagion spread. But that is more misdirection: in the current, ever-more repressive climate, all protest must first be “anti-lockdown” before it can be protest.

The truth is that the demonstrators are out on the streets for a wide variety of reasons, including to protest against the oppressive new Police and Crime Bill, under the slogan “Kill the Bill”.

There are lots of well-founded reasons for people to be angry or worried at the moment. But the threat to that most cherished of all social freedoms – the right to protest – deserves to be at the top of the list.

If free speech ensures we have some agency over our own minds, protest allows us to mobilise collectively once we have been persuaded of the need and urgency to act. Protest is the chance we have to alert others to the strength of our feelings and arguments, to challenge a consensus that may exist only because it has been manufactured by political and media elites, and to bring attention to neglected or intentionally obscured issues.

Speech and protest are intimately connected. Free speech in one’s own home – like free speech in a prison cell – is a very stunted kind of freedom. It is not enough simply to know that something is unjust. In democratic societies, we must have the right to do our best to fix injustice.

Cast out as heretics

Not so long ago, none of this would have needed stating. It would have been blindingly obvious. No longer. Large sections of the population are happy to see speech rights stripped from those they don’t like or fear. They are equally fine, it seems, with locking up people who cause a “nuisance” or are “too noisy” in advancing a cause with which they have no sympathy – especially so long as fear of the pandemic takes precedence.

My latest: Trump is not the cause of US political woes, he is one obnoxious symptom. For that reason, banning him from Twitter will not heal the US political divide, it will deepen and inflame it <https://t.co/Qe5FYwSICN>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [January 11, 2021](#)

That is how fear works. The establishment has been using fear to keep us divided and weak

since time immemorial. The source of our fear can be endlessly manipulated: black men, feminists, Jews, hippies, travellers, loony lefties, libertarians. The only limitation is that the object of our fear must be identifiable and distinguishable from those who think of themselves as responsible, upstanding citizens.

In a time of pandemic, those who are to be feared can encompass anyone who does not quietly submit to those in authority. Until recently there had been waning public trust in traditional elites such as politicians, journalists and economists. But that trend has been reversed by a new source of authority – the medical establishment.

Because today's mantra is "follow the science", anyone who demurs from or questions that science – even when the dissenters are other scientists – can be cast out as a heretic. The *political* logic of this is rarely discussed, even though it is profoundly dangerous.

Political certainty

Politicians have much to gain from basking in the reflected authority of science. And when politics and science are merged, as is happening now, dissent can be easily reformulated as either derangement or criminal intent. On this view, to be against lockdown or to be opposed to taking a vaccine is not just wrong but as insane as denying the laws of gravity. It is proof of one's irrationality, of the menace one poses to the collective.

But medicine – the grey area between the science and art of human health – is not governed by laws in the way gravity is. That should be obvious the moment we consider the infinitely varied ways Covid has affected us as individuals.

The complex interplay between mind and body means reactions to the virus, and the drugs to treat it, are all but impossible to predict with any certainty. Which is why there are 90-year-olds who have comfortably shaken off the virus and youths who have been felled by it.

But a politics of "follow the science" implies that issues relating to the virus and how we respond to it – or how we weigh the social and economic consequences of those responses – are purely scientific. That leaves no room for debate, for disagreement. And authoritarianism is always lurking behind the façade of political certainty.

Public coffers raided

In a world where politicians, journalists and medical elites are largely insulated from the concerns of ordinary people – precisely the world we live in – protest is the main way to hold these elites accountable, to publicly test their political and "scientific" priorities against our social and economic priorities.

That is a principle our ancestors fought for. You don't have to agree with what Piers Corbyn says to understand the importance that he and others be allowed to say it – and not just in their living rooms, and not months or years hence, if and when the pandemic is declared over.

The right to protest must be championed even through a health crisis – most especially during a health crisis, when our rights are most vulnerable to erasure. The right to protest needs to be supported even by those who back lockdowns, even by those who fear that protests during Covid are a threat to public health. And for reasons that again should not need stating.

Politicians and the police must not be the ones to define what protests are justified, what protests are safe, what protests are responsible.

Because otherwise, those in power who took advantage of the pandemic to raid the public coffers and waste billions of pounds on schemes whose main purpose was to enrich their friends have every reason to dismiss anyone who protests against their cupidity and incompetence as endangering public health.

At what point does the UK officially become a banana republic? At the point when its health secretary awards a massive contract for medical supplies to his former neighbour and pub landlord? <https://t.co/9DPIVXj5DB>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [November 27, 2020](#)

Because otherwise, leaders who want to crush protests against their their current, and future, criminal negligence with extraordinary new police powers have every incentive to characterise their critics as anti-lockdown, or anti-vaccine, or anti-public order, or anti-science - or whatever other pretext they think will play best with the “responsible” public as they seek to cling to power.

And because otherwise, the government may decide it is in its interests to stretch out the pandemic - and the emergency regulations supposedly needed to deal with it - for as long as possible.

Selective freedoms

Quite how mercurial are the current arguments for and against protest was highlighted by widespread anger at the crushing by the Metropolitan Police this month of a vigil following the murder of Sarah Everard in London. A Met police officer has been charged with kidnapping and murdering her.

A reactionary police force full of white men picked chiefly for their physical attributes is not only inherently violent, institutionally racist and hostile towards political protest but also anti-women. Now who would have guessed that? <https://t.co/PfCYwwmF1N>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [March 15, 2021](#)

In the spirit of the times, there has been much wider public sympathy for a vigil for a murder victim than there has been for more overtly political demonstrations like those against the Police and Crime Bill. But if health threats are really the measure of whether large public gatherings are allowed - if we “follow the science” - then neither is justified.

That is not a conclusion any of us should be comfortable with. It is not for governments to select which types of protests they are willing to confer rights on, even during a pandemic. We either uphold the right of people to congregate when they feel an urgent need to protest - whether it be against the erosion of basic freedoms, or in favour of greater safety for vulnerable communities, or against political corruption and incompetence that costs lives - or we do not.

We either support the right of every group to hold our leaders to account or we do not. Selective freedoms, inconsistent freedoms, are freedom on licence from those in power. They are no freedom at all.

Fight for survival

What the UK's Police and Crime Bill does, like similar legislation in the US and Europe, is to declare some protests as legitimate and others as not. It leaves it to our leaders to decide, as they are trying to do now through the pandemic, which protests constitute a "nuisance" and which do not.

The political logic of the Bill is being contested by a minority - the hippies, the leftists, the libertarians. They are standing up for the right to protest, as the majority complacently assumes that they will have no need of protest.

That is pure foolishness. We are all damaged when the right to protest is lost.

It is unlikely that the aim of the Police and Crime Bill is to keep us permanently locked down - as some fear. It has another, longer-term goal. It is being advanced in recognition by our elites that we are hurtling towards an environmental dead-end for which they have no solutions, given their addiction to easy profits and their own power.

Decades late we *again* learn that corporations lied to us, knowing they were destroying our health, and regulators failed to act.

Decades in the future, we'll learn exactly the same: that these corporations were lying to us right now and got away with it <https://t.co/gj3UOqEbZq>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [March 19, 2021](#)

Already a small minority understand that we are running out of time. Groups like Extinction Rebellion - just like the suffragettes before them - believe the majority can only be woken from their induced slumber if they are disturbed by noise, if their lives are disrupted.

This sane minority is treading the vanishingly thin line between alienating the majority and averting oblivion for our species. As the stakes grow higher, as awareness of imminent catastrophe intensifies, those wishing to make a nuisance of themselves, to be noisy, will grow.

What we decide now determines how that struggle plays out: whether we get to take control of our future and the fight for our survival, or whether we are forced to stay mute as the disaster unfolds.

So pray for the "anti-lockdown" protesters whether you support their cause or not - for they carry the heavy weight of tomorrow on their shoulders.

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Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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