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# THE EXTREMELY WEIRD POLITICS OF COVID

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I want to put a text before you, from February 2020, the ideological landscape into which the coronavirus first arrived. It's a review in *The London Review of Books*, a fine highbrow left-of-center publication, covering a book about plague and quarantine in 17th-century Italy. The book, by the University of London historian, John Henderson, details the attempts by the city of Florence — led by its public health board, the Sanità — to avoid the awful fate of other Italian cities: first by closing the city to commerce and then by imposing quarantines, lockdowns and what we now call social distancing.

The sympathies of the reviewer — Erin Maglaque, another historian of early modern Europe — are not exactly with the Sanità. Like our federal government in 2020, the Florentine state spent lavishly to make its restrictions sustainable, delivering wine and bread and meat to households (“On Tuesdays, they got a sausage seasoned with pepper, fennel and rosemary”) during the mandatory confinement. But the quarantine was also inevitably punitive and authoritarian, and Maglaque’s review details the way public health restrictions reproduced and deepened inequality and how already-disfavored groups — the poor, Jews, prostitutes — were regarded as particularly dangerous “vectors of contagion” and policed accordingly.

Meanwhile, the most sympathetic characters in her account are people who found ways to steal a bit of normal life in defiance of public health restrictions — like two girls, Maria and Camilla, who danced illicitly with their friends and

got those friends’ parents arrested. At the end of the review, Maglaque notes that Florence achieved a much lower mortality rate than other Italian cities — just about 12 percent, compared to 33 percent in Venice, 46 percent in Milan and a staggering 61 percent in Verona. But she hesitates to give the Sanità all the credit; maybe the disease was just “less virulent” among the Florentines. And besides: Percentages tell us something about living and dying. But they don’t tell us much about survival. Florentines understood the dangers, but gambled with their lives anyway: out of boredom, desire, habit, grief. To learn what it meant to survive, we might do better to observe Maria and Camilla, the teenage sisters who danced their way through the plague year.

It’s a fine review of a fascinating-sounding book, but I confess that when I reached this ending — and again, I was reading it in early 2020, when Covid was a concern but not yet a world crisis — I rolled my eyes a little. The Sanità’s measures obviously worked! The percentages do tell us about survival, because thousands of Florentines survived to dance and gamble and go to Mass and frequent brothels for years and years after their difficult but temporary spell of quarantine! One could sympathize with the prostitutes who kept working, the peasants slipping “past bored guards as they played cards” or the girls who broke the rules and danced. But given that the Sanità was fighting a disease that killed more than half the population in some cities, it felt like folly to romanticize the rule-flouters.

And not just folly but a particular kind of left-wing folly — still worse, left-wing academic folly — whereas my more pro-Sanità reaction felt impeccably right wing. In a crisis the government needs to act to save lives, even if ordinary liberties need to be suspended. Yes, there will be unevenly distributed injustices; yes, it’s good to point that out. But if the Sanità’s temporary authoritarianism saved thousands of lives, then it deserved the gratitude of Florentines, despite the costs.



That was my view in February 2020. It was also my view in March, April and May 2020, when I was a Covid hawk but many other American conservatives embraced a much more libertarian position on how to respond to our own pandemic. Indeed, by late spring, it was commonplace for the right to critique the Sanità of Anthony Fauci on roughly the same grounds that *The L.R.B.*’s reviewer critiqued the 17th-century Florentine authorities — arguing that lockdowns were instruments of class discrimination; that elites flouted the rules while demanding compliance from the lower orders; that distancing imposed too much unhappiness and loneliness and misery, especially on the

young; that the bare living preserved by public health restrictions wasn’t worth the cost to life in full.

Over the past 16 months, I have shifted somewhat in this Covid-dovish direction. I think schools should have been open everywhere last fall; I think mask requirements should have mostly gone away with widespread vaccination; I think you can see in certain public health mandarins and certain countries chasing Covid zero a pathology of control that’s incompatible with human flourishing. I also have a general sympathy for Americans who haven’t been immediately on board with all the rulings from our Sanità — in part because I’ve had my own difficult medical experiences and in part because there’s been so much obvious expert-class bumbling through out the pandemic.

But at the same time, I remain a Covid hawk relative to many conservative writers and talkers. Knowing what we know now, I would have supported much more draconian measures in February 2020, in terms of travel restrictions, border closures and quarantine requirements, than anything we did. I still think the March response to the first coronavirus wave — shut everything down and spend a lot of money until we figure out just how bad this is going to be — was fundamentally correct.



Likewise, maintaining indoor mask mandates, social distancing rules and limits on mass gatherings into the winter of 2021 still seems entirely reasonable, especially since the speed with which we developed vaccines created a window



in which restrictions that lasted mere months could save a lot of lives. And more recently many Republicans have let reasonable doubts about vaccine mandates undercut their commitment to finding ways, by hook or crook, to get as many people vaccinated as possible.

Informing my continued Covid-hawk status is the fact that — as I noted in my weekend column — while the Covid death rate has not been nearly as brutal as those 17th-century Italian percentages, it has still been much, much higher than a lot of Covid doves wanted to initially believe. In the first months of the pandemic, I was often reassured by conservative friends that data would reveal that more people had already been infected than the official numbers showed and thus the disease was far less lethal and herd immunity far closer than official projections assumed. Or, alternatively, that the first plunge in death rates in the late spring of 2020 was the disease burning itself out, independent of anything we did, and that the belief that this needed to be treated as an extended emergency was all hype from anti-Trumpers.

These friends were wrong. And as someone who thought of my Covid-hawkish position as the more right-wing one, I’ve found it remarkable that through all those hundreds of thousands of deaths — deaths that many doves didn’t think would happen — the American right’s libertarian stance has mostly stuck.

But as someone who can see lots of specific issues on which the doves and libertarians have a point, I’m equally fascinated by how dramatically liberals have swung against any acknowledgment of what until very recently seemed like a core left perspective — that stringent public health responses are inherently authoritarian and inevitably ratify various forms of inequality and of social control.

As Justin E.H. Smith, an American-born academic in Paris, noted in a recent essay, a left that just a little while ago seemed committed to Foucauldian critiques of biopolitics and fears of what governments do with emergency powers now is “dug in so deeply on the side of anti-anti-vaxx signaling” that it can’t “acknowledge anything worrisome about the new high-tech hygiene regime, about how hard it might be to dismantle it once it has outlived its purpose, about how it might sprout new purposes that are inimical to human thriving.”

What’s especially striking is how smoothly and absolutely these shifts happened — how quickly, and without embarrassment or backward looks, much of the right started talking like Michel Foucault and his disciples and much of the left starting embracing the mind-set of the Florentine Sanità, as though those had been their natural and inevitable positions all along.