

America Is a Sham

Policy changes in reaction to the coronavirus reveal how absurd so many of our rules are to begin with.

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Security and security theater at the airport.

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America Might Be Least Prepared for What's Coming

Maybe it will be the hand sanitizer that finally exposes the sham.

The Transportation Security Administration announced Friday that due to the coronavirus outbreak, they're waiving the familiar four-ounce limit for liquids and gels—for hand sanitizer only. You may now bring a bottle of Purell as large as 12 ounces onto the plane to assist in your constant sanitizing of yourself, your family, your seat, your bag of peanuts, and everything else. All other liquids and gels, however, are still restricted to four ounces.

Among many shocks of the last week—school closures, Tom Hanks, the shuttering of one sports league after another—this rule change registers as major. The liquid restriction has been a key component of air travel ever since 2006. If people are now allowed to bring 12-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer onto planes, won't the planes blow up?

The TSA can declare this rule change because the limit was always arbitrary, just one of the countless rituals of security theater to which air passengers are subjected every day. Flights are no more dangerous today, with the hand sanitizer, than yesterday, and if the TSA allowed you to bring 12 ounces of shampoo on a flight tomorrow, flights would be no more dangerous then. The limit was bullshit. The ease with which the TSA can toss it aside makes that clear.

All over America, the coronavirus is revealing, or at least reminding us, just how much of contemporary American life is bullshit, with power structures built on punishment and fear as opposed to our best interest. Whenever the government or a corporation benevolently withdraws some punitive threat because of the coronavirus, it's a signal that there was never any good reason for that threat to exist in the first place.

Each day of this public health crisis brings a new example. People thrown in jail for minor offenses? San Antonio is one of many jurisdictions to announce that, to keep jails from being crowded with sick citizens, they'll stop doing that. Why were they doing it in the first place?

The federal government charging interest on loans to attend college? Well, Donald Trump has instructed government agencies who administer loans to waive interest accrual for the duration of the crisis. But why on earth is our government charging its own citizens interest anyway?

Broadband data caps and throttled internet? Those have been eliminated by AT&T and other ISPs, because of the coronavirus. But data caps and throttling were really just veiled price hikes that served no real technical purpose. Why did we put up with them?

Police helping landlords evict tenants in times of financial trouble? Due to the coronavirus, not anymore in New York, Miami, and New Orleans. But—and you see where this is going—why do the police aid evictions when tenants are stricken with other, non-coronavirus illnesses?

The city shutting off your water, or your power, as punishment for hardship? During this public health emergency, plenty of cities and companies have suddenly found a way to keep service turned on. “As long as COVID-19 remains a health concern,” said Detroit mayor Mike Duggan, “no Detroit resident should have concerns about whether their water service will be interrupted.” Why in the hell should any Detroit resident have concerns about their water service being interrupted, ever? Shouldn’t clean water be the absolute base level of service delivered by a city to its residents?

Sick employees forced to take unpaid leave or work while sick if they want to keep their jobs? Walmart recently announced it would provide up to two weeks of paid leave for any employee who contracts the coronavirus. And the House just passed a bill to address the problem, though as the New York Times editorial board notes, the House’s failure to make the bill universal “is an embarrassment that endangers the health of workers, consumers and the broader American public.” But why should any sick worker fear losing their pay or their job at any time? And why are the most vulnerable to punitive sick leave practices the workers making the lowest wages?

In every single one of these cases, it's not just that most of these practices are accepted as "standard." It's that they are a way to punish people, to make lives more difficult, or to make sure that money keeps flowing upward. Up until now activists and customers have been meant to believe that the powers that be could *never* change these policies—it would be too expensive, or too unwieldy, or would simply upset the way things are done. But now, faced suddenly with an environment in which we're all supposed to at least appear to be focused on the common good, the rule-makers have decided it's OK to suspend them. It's a crisis, after all. Everyone's got to do their part.

So what will happen when the crisis passes? Yes, it's worth asking yourself now, in the early days of this pandemic, how you might change your behavior, what temporary adjustments in your lifestyle you might adopt permanently in the after times—whether that's working from home, or cutting back on airplane travel. But it's also worth asking if we are willing to allow governments and corporations to return to business as usual. When everything's back to normal, will we accept cities cutting off their poorest residents' water, or evicting the sick, or throwing someone in jail because they can't afford to pay a fine?

I want to say that once a policy is revealed as bullshit, it gets a lot harder to convince smart, engaged citizens to capitulate to it. That's one reason why activists are agitating to end cash bail in

the coronavirus crisis, or fighting to ensure that coronavirus tests and any eventual vaccine are available to all. Not only would those measures save or better countless lives during the pandemic, but in their common-sense wisdom they expose the absurdity of the opposing view. What kind of ghoul would argue that we *shouldn't* vaccinate everyone against a pandemic threatening the health of our nation? The same kind of ghoul, perhaps, who thinks that cancer treatment, or insulin, should only be available for those lucky enough to be able to pay for them.

In a time of real anxiety, maybe this optimism is just grasping for something good to come of all of this. But that's really up to us. Over the next few weeks, we're going to see more and more absurd, or cruel, or counterproductive practices revealed. Pay attention when they are. Notice the statements the people in charge make when they effortlessly roll back their surcharges and threats, their punishments and impediments. Remember them. And when the time comes that the danger from the virus is no longer as severe, and those people try to quietly reinstate the policies that hurt so many around you, remember that for a lot of Americans, a "return to normal" is a scary prospect. Keep your giant bottle of hand sanitizer. You're gonna need it to deal with all the bullshit that's coming back when the pandemic finally passes.