

Cowboys and Coronavirus: Protesting Covid-19 in 'The Land of the Free'

ROSIE MATHERS

Over the last couple of weeks protests have broken out across America against lockdown measures imposed to reduce the spread and contraction of Covid-19. Rallies across Northern and Southern states have seen demonstrators take the streets to call for an end to quarantine, an urgent reopening the economy, and the return of over 20 million Americans to work. An article from the New York Times (Warzel 2020) points to the inevitability of this reaction from the Republican side, as the logical conclusion to the far-rights 'donor-funded shock jock-led liberty movement'. Translated: a consistent and reasonable reaction within the parameters of free-market Capitalism, where return-to-work and the levelling of the economy are the highest possible priorities. But these actions also speak to something wider – the absolute national faith in personal 'independence' and 'liberty', whereby nothing lies outside the realm of human power, possibility, and control.

Whilst anti-lockdown protests have now appeared across the globe, most notably in Brazil, India, and Germany (Gabbatt 2020), the battle to protect personal freedoms remains a quintessentially American concern. Migrant workers in Mumbai are demanding better social support to protect wider family interests, asking for all outstanding wages to be paid and that unemployed workers be sent back home. In Germany, the anti-lockdown 'Querdenken' movement, roughly translated as 'lateral thinking', calls for a restoration of collective human rights, such as the freedom of assembly and the freedom of religion. In the United States, however, C-19 protestors hold a hyper-individualist stance, where notions of 'freedom' relate more closely to personal violations and constrictions. Protestors insisting to be 'set free', as one placard reads, are defending their constitutional right to personal independence; the freedom to move around, to work, and in a totalising sense, to satisfy their own personal interests. Another placard reads, 'free people make their own risk assessment' – pointing to the idea of independent power and authority which is one of the founding principles of the American dream, where every man is considered governor of his own life.

This is not a new position by American standards – the protection and defence of private life from public regulation can be traced back centuries. The first settlers of contemporary modern America in the 1600s came to pursue an unrestricted lifestyle, free from the tyrannies of Europe, where they could practice religion without persecution and access greater economic opportunities. Early settlers faced intense material and psychological insecurity in preserving this ideal, and threats to this newly won liberty were hard fought. During the 1700s, independently organised colonial militias were formed to protect local towns from outside interference which might jeopardise their freedom. Militias were tasked with stopping those in public office from exacting their authority outside of their charter, as groups of able bodied men between the ages of 17 and 45 were called to defend local territories from centralised rule. These actions soon won constitutional sanctity, and the second amendment states the right to 'a well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State' alongside the right to bear arms.

This almost tribal defence of land and values was epitomised in the Wild West culture of the mid to late 1800s. As historian David Hamilton Murdoch (2001) writes, this period – also known as the American Frontier – crystallised the uniquely American ideals of 'individualism' and 'self-reliance'. A lone gun-toting cowboy; travelling the land and writing his own rules, became the mythical embodiment of personal triumph and liberty. Whether



or not this picture is true to lived reality (cattlemen were more often than not lower class individuals with little respect in society), the cowboy later became a powerful signifier of personal mastery and domination. A ruler of wild land, wild women, and director of his own destiny. In contrast, governmental law enforcement – represented by the sheriff – was often portrayed as unnecessarily interfering, obstructive, and corrupt. In the 1985 Western film 'Silverado', these two forces, the individual and the state, come head to head. The cruel and dishonest Sheriff Cobb is eventually duelled and killed by the film's cowboy hero Paden, who in his goodness and valour replaces Cobb as town authority. Paden's take home message? State powers can't be trusted. *No-one can tell me what to do*. This is one of the fundamental building blocks of American society – the Declaration of Independence states all citizens have equal rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. Freedom to live by one's own laws, above all else, is sacred.

What does this have to do with Coronavirus? Currently, it seems federal lockdown measures (already less strict than other countries across the world) have offended citizens by violating this long-fought moral code of civil liberty. A deep rooted anti-regulation stance flatly rejects the idea of institutionalised control or governmental jurisdiction, especially in relation to people's private lives. These values are echoed in the Republican Covid19 response. Governor of Ohio Mike DeWine backed up his decision to withdraw orders for shoppers to wear masks by saying 'people were not going to accept the government telling them what to do'. The shrugging simplicity behind such statements carries the full weight of American neoliberalism, offering a plain defence of the self-serving individual living in the 'land of the free'. Covid-19 both symbolically and literally eviscerates that freedom – as one of the protests' organisers in Michigan told Fox News, 'quarantine is when you restrict movement of sick people. Tyranny is when you restrict the movement of healthy people.' This equation of protective lockdown measures to social tyranny sidesteps the point, however, as short-term restrictions are imposed to safeguard long-term health, rather than promote a fascist agenda. Providing public, or 'socialist' healthcare, never high on the American agenda, is again relegated below ideological purity – 'This is America, not Nazi Germany' shout protestors.

This confusing 'fight for freedom' is further supported by the Western belief nothing lies outside the realm of human influence and control. Constitution trumps contraction in the case of coronavirus: federally granted laws

are judged powerful enough by protestors to overthrow a biological reality. 'If we can just reinstate our right to freedom, everything will be okay' reason protestors. This idea is a product of human exceptionalism, the belief that people exist separate to, and above, natural ecosystems. The notion is both a proponent and symptom of contemporary Capitalism, where neoliberal man is the basic organising principle and everything else falls in step behind him. In this narrative the ecological world is posited as an object or an appendage to human society – meaningful only as a resource, in terms of what it can provide and supply. Within this worldview, the presence of something as feral, foreign, and ungovernable as a 'killer virus' against which people are powerless, is simply not conceivable. A living microscopic parasite logically falls under the realm of human governance. One recent placard, held by a child at an anti-lockdown rally in Louisiana, reads 'no virus can cancel the constitution', capturing the full faith in the emancipatory power of American independence.

Whilst anti-lockdown protestors make up a very small majority of America's population, their presence has been forcibly felt. The media coverage and global awareness of protests has put pressure on the American government to ease quarantine measures before the country is ready, with potential knock-on effects across the globe as other countries are pressured to follow suit. Already touting the worst mortality statistics worldwide, with approximately 75,000 deaths in the US from coronavirus (at the time of writing), well over 40,000 more than the second highest in the United Kingdom, the consequences of opening up quarantine measures in the USA too soon are catastrophic. Some reporters have suggested protests are getting inside endorsement from the Trump administration – in order to legitimate his relaxed efforts and push forwards their agenda of economic preservation. But perhaps the strangest thing about these protests is their inescapable irony: those who turn up to protest coronavirus will be far more likely to catch it. Homemade placards reading 'give me liberty or give me covid', and 'live free or die', feel frighteningly close to the truth, as protestors defy crucial social distancing guidelines, and demand the lifting of necessary measures which would see a sharp spike in fatalities. In addition, the defence of 'freedom' remains a primary concern for those who are already most 'free' in American society – the white, right. Urban, poor, BAME citizens who face a greater risk of contraction and fatality from Covid-19 will be denied their civil liberty through the very requests made by the far-right for public emancipation.

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IMAGE

Demonstrators gather in front of the Colorado State Capitol building to protest the "reopening of Colorado" on April 19, 2020
<https://images.axios.com/pigi1clJQxShdKENIXJw0ZujfY=/2020/04/21/1587444033882.jpg>