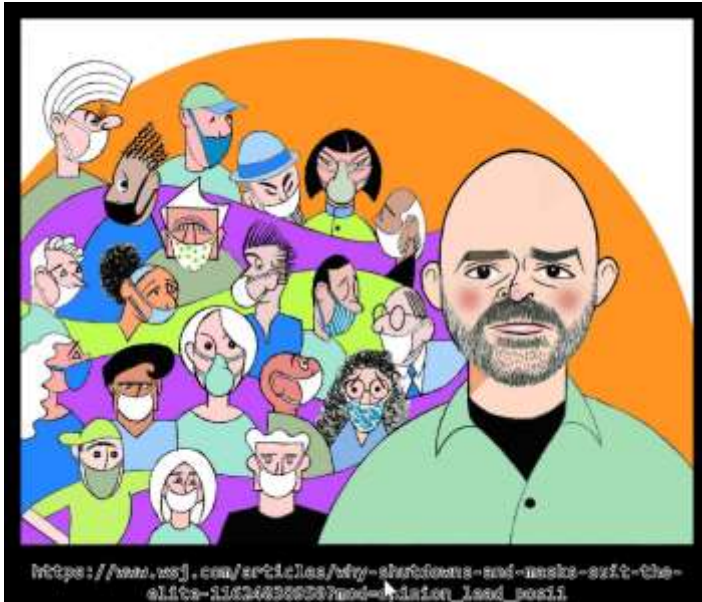


Why Shutdowns and Masks Suit the Elite

Covid restrictions seem less onerous from the standpoint of ‘expressive individualism,’ which defines the self in terms of ‘its will and not its body.’

WSJ, By Barton Swaim,, June 20, 2021



A marvelous review in these pages last November inspired me to read a new book by O. Carter Snead, “What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Human Bioethics.” It was published by Harvard University Press on Oct. 13. Covid-19 had begun its transformation of American life a few months before, and of course the book made no mention of it.

Yet Mr. Snead’s volume helped explain the bizarre and at times perverse response of prosperous Western nations to the pandemic: the long discontinuation of economic life, the belief that pixelated screens can facilitate human relationships, the prohibitions on ordinary social interactions, the fetishization of masks. These policies and practices weren’t handed down from the ether by Reason and Science but bore the weight of contemporary

assumptions about—to borrow Mr. Snead’s title—what it means to be human.

His book isn’t about public health but “public bioethics”—the effort to make humane laws and rules for biotechnology and medical care. Mr. Snead’s premise and theme is that humans are embodied creatures, not mere wills and intellects. That premise stands in contrast with the dominant modern worldview, which he calls “expressive individualism”: the belief that the human self “is not defined by its attachments or networks of relations, but rather by its capacity to choose a future pathway that is revealed by the investigation of its own inner depths of sentiment. . . . Because this self is defined by its capacity to choose, it is associated fundamentally with its will and not its body.”

Mr. Snead is a law professor at Notre Dame and director of its de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture. On a recent trip to the Midwest, I drove to South Bend to ask what the pandemic year has revealed about our understanding of humanness.

Seated in Mr. Snead’s office, I offer an explanation for my physical presence that would have sounded eccentric before March 2020: Connecting by videoconference would have been an ill fit for a conversation about embodiment. He agrees: On Zoom, Mr. Snead says, “the person you see on your laptop is only an image. What matters is only the content coming from the person’s cognitive faculty.”

Early in the process of writing the book, Mr. Snead had dinner with his friend Leon Kass, the University of Chicago professor. Greeting each other at the restaurant, the two hugged (“I’m Italian,” Mr. Snead says, “I’m a hugger”). “As Leon and I talked, I found myself going on and on about the negative dimensions of embodiment—the vulnerability, the mutual dependence, the natural limits. That’s what the book is about. But Leon said to me, ‘Carter, if we didn’t have bodies, we couldn’t have hugged each other just now.’ Suddenly I realized I was missing the gifts of embodiment, the joy and beauty of being physically present with someone else.”

Physical presence is what governmental authorities snatched from people, especially from the vulnerable, during the pandemic. Some of those interventions were necessary, Mr. Snead concedes, but the authorities—together with alarmist news media—showed little capacity to weigh costs against benefits.

We exchange stories of well-intentioned but cruel policies carried out on the elderly and infirm. Mr. Snead tells me about a court case in New Mexico in which an elderly man had to sue the state to care for his wife. The couple lived in an assisted-living home—the husband in independent living and the wife in a dementia unit—and a government edict had prohibited them from touching each other. Their health declined precipitously, but “the guy won, thank God.”

Is the benefit of not contracting Covid-19 worth the cost of going without the bodily presence of, say, one’s children and grandchildren for months on end? Put that way, I suspect most Americans’ answers would range from “probably not” to “hell, no.” But in 2020 public-health experts and their defenders in the media proceeded as though “yes” were the only conceivable answer. That suggests our cultural elites and policy makers haven’t thought deeply, or at all, about what the human person is.

“I’m worried that our risk calculus has shifted in a dramatic way,” Mr. Snead says. “You think about the flu, you think about other diseases that could be dangerous—or just driving your car—and it feels to me that our risk tolerance is basically zero at this point. And what does that mean? Is the point of human life simply to hide away in a bubble-wrap container so that you don’t ever encounter any risk?”

The pandemic also cast light on the elites’ attitudes toward work. Many politicians like to proclaim the dignity of work. “A job is a lot more than a paycheck,” Joe Biden’s father used to say, according to the president. “Joey, it’s about your respect, your dignity, your place in the community.” Yet a great deal of policy making since March 2020—months-long prohibitions on gainful labor, cash payments to able-bodied people—did not reflect that sentiment. Hasty and ill-defined appeals to public health were all Western political leaders needed to decree lengthy cessations to productive labor. A German TV ad suggested that the young could achieve heroism by doing *absolut gar nichts*—absolutely nothing.

Can we conclude from this that we no longer really believe in the dignity of work? Mr. Snead thinks so. “Work isn’t just about production of value in the economic sense or even having money to live.” He reads a line from Pope John Paul II’s 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*: “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’ ”

“It seems to me,” Mr. Snead says, “that elite ‘opinion makers’ and ‘thought leaders’ ”—he gestures with air quotes—“who only need a laptop and high-speed internet to do their jobs have forgotten the vast number of their fellow citizens whose work actually requires in-person, face-to-face contact. . . . That, I think, reflects a failure to remember one’s neighbor, or anyway the neighbor who isn’t part of”—air quotes again—“the ‘knowledge economy.’ That’s bad enough. But the notion that one can make up for the loss merely by paying people to stay home is evidence we’ve forgotten that work itself is essential to human flourishing.”

The mention of face-to-face contact brings us to the touchiest subject of the pandemic year: masks. Mr. Snead signals his support for mask-wearing as a means of slowing the spread of the virus. Even now, he says, when many vaccinated people still insist on wearing masks, “I’m happy to keep it on if it makes other people more comfortable.”

Still, he regrets the social alienation brought about by a year of masking. “You feel stupid for wearing one around people in a hunting-fishing supplies store.” (Mounted on his office wall is the head of an impressive buck.) “And you feel stupid not wearing one in a more, let’s say, culturally sophisticated place. I think the urge to ‘mask up’ has created a level of social anxiety that wasn’t there before.”

We discuss some of the weirder conventions of late-pandemic face-cloaking: the practice among store managers of requiring their working-class employees to wear masks seemingly for the comfort of their maskless knowledge-class customers, and the way in which some keenly self-conscious people have come to rely on face coverings as a way to hide from the public. The latter reminds Mr. Snead of the “anonymous, unaccountable refuge of social media.”

Knowing he is familiar with the French political philosopher Pierre Manent, I quote Mr. Manent’s recent book “Beyond Radical Secularism: How France and the Christian West Should Respond to the Islamic Challenge” (published in French in 2015 and English in 2016). The passage addresses the burqa, a garment that covers the female face.

“The burqa,” Mr. Manent writes, “is inadmissible . . . because it prevents the exchange of signs by which a human being recognizes another human being. It is by the face that each of us reveals himself or herself at once as a human being and as this particular human being. The visibility of the face is one of the elementary conditions of sociability, of this mutual awareness that is prior to and conditions any declaration of rights. To present visibly one’s refusal to be seen is an ongoing aggression against human coexistence. Europeans have never concealed the face, except the executioner’s.”

Is this attitude behind the instinctive dislike of masking in parts of American society? Mr. Snead thinks about it and nods: “Anything that dehumanizes another person, anything that prevents one person from connecting with and recognizing another as human, is generally a bad and dangerous thing, in my view.”

He puts this kind of impersonalization in the same category with “what you see online—people treating each other in ways that would be unimaginable if they were in the same room. I have friends who live in the same neighborhood who treat each other abominably online, and I tell them: If you guys were at a dinner party at my house, you wouldn’t talk to each other like that. What are you doing?”

That’s not to condemn masks any more than it is to condemn the internet, but it raises a question: Has a year of faceless interaction, mandated by government and monitored by authority figures and busybodies, exacerbated the sense of estrangement and annoyance many Americans feel toward each other? That so many people are unwilling to take them off long after their benefits have expired would suggest unintended social consequences.

The dispute over masks—like those over school closures, business shutdowns, social-distancing guidelines and all the rest—should always properly have been a discussion of acceptable versus unacceptable risk. But the preponderance of America’s cultural and political leaders showed no ability to think about risk in a helpful way. The threat of infection overwhelmed every public discussion; every policy, no matter how draconian or impossible to enforce, was worth trying if it could, in theory, save one human life.

But what is a human life? That was a question very few of our authorities cared to answer—or even ask.

Mr. Swaim is a Journal editorial page writer. Article source: https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-shutdowns-and-masks-suit-the-elite-11624038950?mod=opinion_lead_pos11