

Equality Prepared Us for Coronavirus Restrictions

I caught a small whiff of hope today.

This whiff came when a relative of mine received a phone call from the cardiac rehab center at the local hospital. The rehab classes he had been taking following heart surgery were cancelled when coronavirus hit. Now there was good news: rehab will be revived next week.

Baby steps, maybe, but it seems likely that restrictions are starting to loosen. We may be able to breathe free again!

But will life be as free as we've known it? Perhaps not. Like the days following the tragedy of Sept. 11, we may be subjected to a whole [new level of surveillance and security](#), reports *The Wall Street Journal*. This is especially true of the place we spend many of our waking hours: the office.

“The arrival of Covid-19 is [taking surveillance to a higher level](#), with some employers planning to track movements and gather personal information like never before in Western democracies. It marks a new chapter in the debate over privacy, and the trade-offs people are willing to make for safety.

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Building owners said the systems—similar to measures used in China that helped slow the spread of the virus—promote health and safety, so that employers can better monitor and enforce separation between workers, and quickly [determine which employees could have come in contact](#) with an infected colleague.”

It seems that for many, “invasive” surveillance measures are a

small price to pay to secure safety, health, and happiness.

Alexis de Tocqueville could not have imagined such a level of surveillance, yet he knew well the signs of a despotic government. In his work, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville [describes a group of people kept in perpetual childhood](#) by a parent who doesn't want to prepare its offspring for adulthood. This is the way government behaves as well, keeping people in this state by ensuring their continual happiness:

“[I]t is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness: it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances – what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living? Thus it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range, and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself.”

The odd thing, however, is what Tocqueville names as the root problem in this scenario: equality.

“The principle of equality,” Tocqueville writes, “has prepared men for these things: it has predisposed men to endure them, and oftentimes to look on them as benefits.”

Given that equality is a cardinal virtue of our time, I stopped to think about this assertion. Where do we demand equality? Education is one area. It is said that everyone has a right to attend school for as long as they care to. To ensure this happens at all levels, we implement equality measures based on race, or on gender, or even on sexual

identity. This happens in the workforce as well, in housing measures, and in practically every aspect of civil society.

We want to be kind and live in a happy, friendly society, so we go along with these things, thinking that it's only fair. In other words, we are predisposed to accept interference in our lives by our government, and even to enjoy some of the benefits which are a result of this interference, in order that we might continue to support equality and fairness.

Unfortunately, blind acceptance of equality comes at a cost. Tocqueville explains:

“After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned them at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a net-work of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”

So how do we maintain freedom in a society which promotes equality at all costs? Tocqueville suggests the best method is through the press.

“Equality deprives a man of the support of his connections; but the press enables him to summon all his fellow-countrymen and all his fellow-men to his assistance. Printing has accelerated the progress of equality, and it is also one of its best correctives.”

The upcoming weeks promise a slow return to normalcy, but they also promise a good deal of contention in the media as we debate the amount of control we should cede to the government in entering a post-coronavirus society.

I'll be the first to admit that such a debate is tiring. But if Tocqueville is right, a rigorous public debate is the only thing that will maintain the balance in favor of being equally free rather than equally subservient.

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