

**Pandemic Exposures:
Economy and Society in the
Time of Coronavirus**



Director

Anne-Christine Taylor

Editorial Collective

Deborah Durham
Catherine V. Howard
Vita Peacock
Nora Scott
Hylton White

Managing Editor

Nanette Norris

Editorial Officer

Jane Sabherwal

HAU Books are published by the
Society for Ethnographic Theory (SET)

www.haubooks.org

**Pandemic Exposures:
Economy and Society in the
Time of Coronavirus**

*Edited by Didier Fassin
and Marion Fourcade*



HAU Books
Chicago

© 2021 HAU Books

Pandemic Exposures: Economy and Society in the Time of Coronavirus, edited by Didier Fassin and Marion Fourcade, is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

Cover: Detail from “Several Circles” by Vassily Kandinsky, 1926.

Cover design: Ania Zayco

Layout design: Deepak Sharma, Prepress Plus

Typesetting: Prepress Plus (www.prepressplus.in)

ISBN: 978-1-912808-80-9 [Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-912808-82-3 [PDF]

ISBN: 978-1-912808-84-7 [eBook]

LCCN: 2021931410

HAU Books

Chicago Distribution Center

11030 S. Langley Ave.

Chicago, IL 60628

www.haubooks.org

HAU Books publications are printed, marketed, and distributed by The University of Chicago Press.

www.press.uchicago.edu

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

CHAPTER 9

To Kill or Let Die

How Americans Argue about Life, Economy, and Social Agency

Webb Keane

In much of the world, the COVID pandemic brought into sharp relief some fundamental and long-standing tensions among democratic governance, economic reasoning, scientific authority, and moral intuitions. These tensions are especially strong in the United States, given the peculiar coexistence of free market fundamentalism, patriotic communitarianism, libertarianism, social conservatism, positivism, and religiosity so distinctive of this country. The pandemic forced choices whose public expression — which ranged from folksy common sense to austere utilitarian logic — took increasingly stark and dichotomized forms. Eventually even the simple wearing of a protective mask became a simple either/or political statement.

The debates over lockdowns, vaccines, and other measures centered on how we weigh lives against economic well-being. They expressed something fundamental about the way Americans think about economics, the public good, and the legitimacy and powers of social agency. Because of the way these arguments tended to portray the responses in sharply dichotomous terms, they often bore a strong resemblance to the so-called “Trolley Problem” in moral philosophy, which I describe below.

Seeing how this problem was brought to bear on real social policy and people's reactions to it on the ground sheds light on some of the characteristic features, and shortcomings, of the utilitarian rationality that underlies it. Looking in turn from the formality of the trolley problem back to the pandemic can also clarify the broader assumptions that underlay the American debates.

Your Granddad or Your Country?

As the United States moved to a scattering of locally variable stay-at-home orders to slow the spread of COVID, some conservatives objected to the orders on the grounds that they would harm the economy. The first lockdowns began in March 2020. Even before many were enacted, the Republican lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, spoke on Tucker Carlson's right-wing talk show on Fox TV (Patrick 2020; see also Cole 2020; Livingston 2020). An anti-big government "Tea Party" conservative, Patrick was reacting to the pressure to impose restrictions on businesses and public gatherings in order to slow the spread of COVID. Earlier he had texted Carlson to say that, as a grandfather, he wanted his grandchildren "to have a shot at the American dream. But right now this virus, which all the experts say that 98% of all people will survive, ... is killing our country in another way. ... [It] could bring about a total economic collapse and potentially a collapse of our society. ... So, I say let's give this a few more days or weeks ... but after that let's go back to work and go back to living. Those who want to shelter in place can still do so. But we can't live with this uncertainty."

The on-air interview expanded on the theme. Stressing that he was about to turn seventy, and was therefore in a high-risk category, he said:

I'm not living in fear of COVID-19. What I'm living in fear of is what's happening to this country. Y'know, Tucker, no one reached out to me and said, "As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the American that all America loves for your children and your grandchildren?" And if that's the exchange, I'm all in. ... I don't want the whole country to be sacrificed and that's what I see. ... I've talked to hundreds of people, and everyone says pretty much the same thing, that we can't lose our whole country. ... Let's get back to work, let's get back to living. ... And those of us who are seventy plus, we'll take care of ourselves, but

don't sacrifice the country, don't do that, don't ruin this great America dream.

[Carlson]: So you're saying that this disease could take your life but that's not the scariest thing to you? There's something that would be worse than dying?

[Patrick]: Yeah, ... the point is, our biggest gift we give to our country and our children and our grandchildren is the legacy of our country. (Patrick 2020, my transcription)

Patrick's remarks succinctly capture some of the key themes running through the anti-lockdown position: the use of probabilistic reasoning (98 percent will not die); the either/or view of disease (you either die or not); the view of populations as an aggregate (Americans undifferentiated by any relevant characteristic such as race, gender, working conditions, financial precarity, or access to health care — except for age); the decisionism (it assumes that everyone has a choice and those who want to can simply shelter in place); the identification of nation with economy (as they understood it) rather than, say, its people (the American dream); the relative value of life; and the language of sacrifice (an exchange of one's own life for the country). I will return to these below.

Although Patrick spoke with the exaggerated simplicity favored by Fox News, he was not an outlier. About a week before Patrick's interview, Ron Johnson, a Republican senator from Wisconsin and chair of the Senate's Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, had said: "97 to 99 percent will get through this and develop immunities and will be able to move beyond this. But we don't shut down our economy because tens of thousands of people die on the highways. It's a risk we accept so we can move about. We don't shut down our economies because tens of thousands of people die from the common flu. ... Getting coronavirus is not a death sentence except for maybe no more than 3.4 percent of our population" (Gilbert 2020).

Tom Galisano, the founder of the information technology provider Paychex, put it in even starker terms: "The damages of keeping the economy closed could be worse than losing a few more people. You're picking the better of two evils" (Reich 2020). And right-wing radio host Glen Beck echoed Patrick's sacrificial language and the equation of the country with the economy: "I would rather die than kill the country. 'Cause it's not the economy that's dying, it's the country" (Richardson 2020). All of these represent the situation as presenting two clear cut options, about

which there is a choice to be made: either allow people to die or kill the country (equated with “the economy”).

Needless to say, comments like these provoked strong responses. Significantly, however, these tended to accept the dichotomous terms expressed by Patrick — that we are forced to make an either/or choice between granddad and the economy — while reversing the values. Gilberto Hinojosa, the chairperson of the Texas Democratic Party, condemned Patrick’s remarks in a statement declaring that “the lives of our families, our friends, and our communities have no dollar amount” (Hennessy-Fiske 2020). Similarly, New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo tweeted: “My mother is not expendable. We will not put a dollar figure on human life. ... No one should be talking about social Darwinism for the sake of the stock market” (Cuomo 2020). By referring to social Darwinism, Cuomo points out something that probabilistic statements tend to obscure. If you speak of possible deaths as a percentage of the total population treated in the aggregate, you ignore the likelihood that it is *certain kinds of lives* that will be lost. Although Lieutenant Governor Patrick, for his part, does acknowledge the special vulnerability of the old, it is only in order to grant them the dignified status of self-sacrificers. About other vulnerable categories — Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, the poor, and those who jobs require constant exposure — he remains silent. So too, nothing is said of their capacity — or its lack — to be agents of their own sacrifice, or their willingness to do so were they granted that dignity.

Like Governor Patrick, Governor Cuomo juxtaposes the economy to the image of his mother. This familiar rhetorical move puts the face of intimate affect on the cold numbers of statistical calculation. (By the same token, in the rhetoric of pricing human lives, he is bracketing the economic hardship faced by the most vulnerable during a shutdown.) Like the self-sacrificing Patrick, mother appears here as an individual; unlike Patrick, she is not the willing agent of her own potential demise. But she also stands in for a demographic category: the old. By describing her possible death not as sacrifice (a virtue) but as Darwinism (a eugenic evil), and making her not the agent of her own sacrifice (as in Patrick’s imagined death) but its patient, Cuomo points to the possibility of “gerocide” (Cohen 2020, drawing on Servello and Ettore 2020; see also Lewis 2020). The possibility of death by COVID is crystallized into the figure of those who are already most defined by the imminence of death — rather than, say, the wisdom of age or the nurturance of descendants.

Although we might feel that Cuomo's reference to social Darwinism is exaggerated, it seems that there were some public figures who did indeed explicitly call for a policy of "culling the herd" by allowing the elimination of the most vulnerable, such as residents in nursing homes (Law 2020; McLean, cited in Cohen 2020). Although few were willing to follow them to that conclusion, the more general framing of the problem — lives versus the economy — dominated the discussion.

But what is "the economy" such that it can be compared to granddad? Whereas some conservatives spoke of lost jobs, their critics often accused them of merely defending elite interests, such as stock prices and corporate profits. Describing the early period of the outbreak, one critical commentator wrote that "officials expressed skepticism that drastic measures were necessary to avoid an outbreak. If anything, their comments were focused on potential stock market losses rather than public health risks. ... Governments and businesses are now being forced to weigh corporate profits against human life to a newly extreme degree" (Liu 2020). Interestingly enough, as it transpired, the financial sector did remarkably well: it was small businesses like restaurants, bars, hair salons, tattoo parlors, nail salons, and brick-and-mortar shops, along with hotels, theaters, and airlines, that were more visibly hurt. Indeed, recognizing that it is the most vulnerable members of society who were going to be on the frontlines, some on the left were also worried about the economic risks of pandemic lockdowns, something the stark binaries of political argument — and moral decisionism — made it easy to overlook (see Fassin, this volume).

Economies or lives? What we consider to be commensurable weights the scales. We can immediately visualize the hairdresser and the bartender. By contrast, Liu (2020) portrays "the economy" as an abstraction personified by other abstractions, stock prices, and corporations, which are certainly distant from the experience and the personal finances of most Americans.

Taking a different angle, one critic of Governor Patrick treats the economy as everyday consumerism: "If you asked my kids if they would rather have more stuff or have their Grandpa and Nanna, they would choose their grandparents with no hesitation" (tweet by Gene Wu, quoted in Morris and Garrett 2020). The very word "stuff" relegates material interests to the category of unnecessary excess. The implication is drawn out by another critic, for whom the economy simply stands for materialistic values in general: "The decision and subsequent action is people or money. It's really that simple. ... And, not to forget, any who

advocate sacrificing others for wealth can no longer claim to be Christian” (Trollman, comment on Hooks 2020). Again, we hear the language of sacrifice, now within a distinctively religious context. Here we enter the expanded sphere of transcendental values. If the position represented by Governor Patrick takes lives and the economy to be the same order of thing, and thus commensurable, that transcendental viewpoint takes them to be incommensurable (see Anderson 1995; Feinberg 2005; Lukes 1997; Zelizer 1994).

Would You Push Granddad in Front of the Trolley?

It is easy to see these statements in the simple terms of left and right, progressive and reactionary, or pro-social and pro-business. Such is the nature of polarized politics in the age of social media. The right-wing focus on economic costs seemed far more audible in public discourse than any similar concerns from the left. But consider how both sides also converge in portraying the options in binary terms: kill granddad to save the economy or kill the economy to save granddad. In the stark imagery of Governor Jay Inslee of Washington: “Going to the bar is fun. . . . Been doing it for years. But you might be killing your granddad by going to the bar” (Eldridge 2020).

The way these options are portrayed express something fundamental and distinctive about the way Americans think of the public good and the limits of legitimate social agency. In particular, they display an encounter between rational choice and moralism, both of which are especially prominent in American political discourse. Roughly speaking, rational choice treats ethical decisions in terms of their measurable consequences or expected utilities. Moralism appeals to fundamental deontological principles of duty and obligation, often, but not always, in religious terms (see Keane 2016). To see this more clearly, consider how, when laid out as a morally fraught choice between two, and only two, options — kill granddad or kill the economy — these positions bear a family resemblance to the famous “trolley problem” in moral philosophy.

The trolley problem is a thought experiment originally developed by moral philosophers to clarify their intuitions about agency and responsibility (Foot 1967; Thompson 1976, 1985). Although highly artificial, the trolley problem mimics the dilemmas of medical triage and military situations in which stark choices must be made between clear alternatives, either one of which will inevitably result in harm to someone. In its

basic form, it asks you to imagine that you see an out-of-control trolley hurtling toward five people. There is no time to warn them and no way to stop the trolley. The puzzle emerges from the two scenarios that follow. In one, you could pull a switch that diverts the trolley onto another track that has only one person on it. In the other, you could push a man in front of the trolley, whose weight is sufficient to bring it to a stop. The objective outcome is the same in both cases: one life lost in order to save five. The utilitarian calculus that follows seems indisputable: you should pull the switch or push the man. Yet most people who would accept the first option recoil at the second. How do these actions differ?

The debates around this have been unending and intricate. One theme running through them is known as the Doctrine of Double Effect. This doctrine, which dates back to Thomas Aquinas, turns on a distinction between the intended results of an action, on the one hand, and the unintended but foreseeable consequences of an action, on the other. The doctrine holds that whereas it is immoral to *kill* (the result of pushing someone), it is morally permissible to *let die* (the foreseeable but unintended consequence of diverting the trolley to the track with one person). Put in other terms, by pushing the man, you use a person as the *means to an end*, the saving of five lives. In the Western tradition within which this debate takes place, moral philosophers tend to agree that humans should not be treated instrumentally (this is why a doctor should not kill one patient in order to distribute her organs to save numerous other patients). Unlike pushing the man, in diverting the trolley, one person's death is merely collateral damage, ancillary to the means by which lives are saved. Put another way, were there no man on the other track, diverting the trolley would *still* save five lives. In the case of pushing, by contrast, someone *must* die: the body of one man is necessary for stopping the trolley.

Most anthropologists are likely to say that thought experiments like this vastly oversimplify a complex world, as well as smuggling in ethnocentric assumptions about autonomous decision-making, anonymity, calculation, and so forth. But even if we were to accept the value of thought experiments for purposes of conceptual clarification, applying them to real life still faces the challenge of finding the right analogies. It seems that the Doctrine of Double Effect can play out in opposite directions, depending on how you see the analogy. For Patrick, the economy is the man we are pushing in front the trolley in order to save the granddads down the track. You are killing the economy. Conversely, for Cuomo, we risk pushing granddad in order to save the economy. You are

killing granddad. What are the respective moral alternatives they favor? Patrick would let granddad die (or at least risk dying) in order to save the economy. Cuomo would let the economy die (or at least suffer harm) in order to save granddad.

Sacrificial Exchanges

The virtue of the highly artificial thought experiment is its clarifying simplicity. Of course this is also its weakness, since in real life the devil is in the details. Here are some compounding factors. Recall Patrick's self-proclaimed subject position: he is in the vulnerable category and claims (however tendentiously) to speak on behalf of his age cohort. He repeatedly uses the language of sacrificial exchange. In fact, given the importance of evangelical Christians to his constituency, we might speculate that this has a specifically Christological subtext. More explicitly, however, by equating the economy with the nation (thus denying the global nature of both economy and virus), he portrays himself in patriotic terms, offering to die for his country and for the younger generations that will inherit it. Perhaps we can hear traces of *laissez-faire* economic reason, which accepts job loss in the present for overall economic gains down the line. But, as John Maynard Keynes remarked when he criticized the equilibrium logic of the *laissez-faire* economics of his day, "in the long run we are all dead" (Keynes 1923: 80; a perspective elaborated for liberal governmentality overall by Povinelli 2011). In contrast, Patrick's rhetoric accepts the long-run view, portraying sacrifice as an exchange with future generations (a position not entirely confined to the right; see Fassin, this volume). It is as if the man on the diversionary track were to insist that you *allow* the trolley to run him down.

The alternative can also be put in terms of sacrifice. It is not just the stock market that is at risk: saving granddad will push many other financially precarious individuals over the edge. The economy is not just the stock market or corporate profits. As one commentator recalls, during the Great Depression "the problem wasn't the valuation of companies but rather a vast and incalculable accumulation of human misery — suicides, starvation, the dissolution of families, violence both domestic and impersonal" (Hooks 2020). We have already seen the so-called "deaths of despair" (Case and Deaton 2020) wrought by deindustrialization and other effects of neoliberalism. The breathtaking job losses produced by the quarantine orders might be called sacrificial. But just as neoliberalism

demanded sacrifices for the sake of economic growth, so too in the case of the virus response: no one is asking the victims of economic crises which way the trolley should go.

To adjudicate between these two sacrificial orders calls for something Cuomo and Hinojosa claim is unacceptable, putting a dollar figure on human lives. Yet, of course, this happens all the time, when federal regulators, insurance companies, manufacturers, hospital administrators, and so forth consider how much to spend on safe buildings and pollution controls, how safe to make cars and planes, what to charge for life insurance, and how much to invest in treating rare diseases. Safety research estimates of the “value of a statistical life” track the lifetime additional wages that workers will demand in order to perform dangerous jobs. Policy makers and citizens are generally willing to finance interventions that provide at least one “quality-adjusted life year,” or QALY, for every USD 150,000 spent. QALYs quantify the common-sense notion that we are willing to buy one more year of healthy and happy life, as opposed to a year spent in serious pain or debilitating illness (Pollack 2020). On the basis of such calculations, one sober analysis concludes that, although “proceeding with business as usual would avert a severe recession, it would also cause hundreds of thousands more deaths — and, based on accepted estimates of the cost of a lost life, this increased human toll will more than cancel out the expected economic benefits” (Kellogg Insight 2020). As another puts it, even vulnerable people “have many decades of contributions to the national GDP ahead of them” (Hooks 2020). In order to be persuasive, it seems, even the defense of the elderly must resort not to the moral value of life as such but speak in the hegemonic language of rational choice theory. Turning the tables, then, defenders of the quarantine sometimes resort to the language of *economic* value when countering the sacrificial *morality* of their opponents who defend the economy.

In the end, sacrificial exchange seems to be unavoidable, no matter which direction you take the Doctrine of Double Effect. A glance inside the aggregates of populations and economies quickly shows that differences matter. The switches on the trolley track will favor some over others. One commentator worries that there is already a cultural predisposition toward ageism that will have the effect of turning letting die into killing: “The implication of Patrick’s comments was that older people are a burden on society and should be willing to risk being infected by COVID-19 to make sure that all other Americans are able to patronize bars, restaurants, and stores. ... There is already a widespread belief,

reflected in our jokes, our films, and our TV programs, that people have a sell-by date when it comes to being valuable and productive” (Wexler 2020; see also Cohen 2020).

Age is indeed a factor in utilitarian ethics. A review of policies from sixty medical centers found that the consensus is to give priority to those who are most likely to survive. As one medical ethicist said, “It would be dishonest if we didn’t say age is a driver. Age is correlated with resilience” (quoted in Guarino 2020). Because younger patients, in general, get better faster, they may free up a ventilator more quickly for the next patient. This is the basic logic of triage. As I write this, Los Angeles ambulance crews during a wave of infection have been instructed not to carry to hospitals patients who can be expected not to survive (Lin et al. 2021).

More than that, however, once recovered, the young will on average have more years ahead of them. A report in *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that when allocating a limited number of ventilators, the highest priority should be to save the most “life-years” (Guarino 2020). In effect, there are two ways of counting lives saved, by numbers of individuals and by numbers of years (Fassin 2018). These are not commensurate: whereas ten individuals saved at any age are, presumably, of equal moral worth, ten individuals saved near the end of life count far less in terms of their economic contribution.

Once vaccines became available in December 2020, the trolley decision reappeared with new variations. Like ventilators, doses of the vaccine were a limited good, and priorities had to be established. After accounting for health care workers, the choices were again ranged between reducing the sheer quantity of deaths (start with the old) and getting the economy started (start with “essential workers”). Interestingly, within the category of essential workers, which asserts an *economic* logic, recognition was accorded to “frontline workers,” those whose jobs most exposed them to other people. Since these people tended to be both the most economically precarious (poorly paid cashiers, transit workers, and so forth) and medically vulnerable (their ranks disproportionately made up of minoritized groups), economic logic converged with the *moral* value of saving lives as such. Yet that moral value has to confront the mathematical logic of triage: the numbers of frontline workers far exceed those of the very old. If there are not enough doses to cover a significant *percentage* of the frontline work force, some argue, then we should instead vaccinate members of the category that is small enough to protect *even if* the latter would not be the top priority on other grounds. As I write, the debate has not yet been resolved, and will, presumably, play

out differently in different parts of the country, as did the lockdown and masking measures.

Autonomy, Chance, and Letting Die

Both sides in the debate exemplified by Patrick and Cuomo tend to treat the population as an undifferentiated aggregate or, at most, divided into just two categories: the aged and the rest. Although digitization has been rapidly dividing populations into ever more specific categories (Fourcade 2016), debates like theirs favor pictures with broad outlines. This is not simply an effect of polemics: sometimes aggregates seem to be called for. The Environmental Protection Agency currently values a “statistical life” at about USD 9.6 million, “regardless of the age, income, or other population characteristics of the affected population” (EPA 2020). But a glance inside that aggregate reveals that only about a quarter of the American working population has the kind of job that could be carried out from home. This tends to be people in the better paid sectors, such as professionals and office workers (who are also more likely to be whiter and healthier than average). Service workers simply do not have the choice of working from home and face either unemployment or exposure. As a result, “the best safeguard against the novel coronavirus is the ability to voluntarily withdraw oneself from capitalism” (Liu 2020). It turns out, then, that when the trolley comes barreling their way, some people can just step off the tracks. Others cannot. The tragic irony, then, is that those who are most vulnerable *medically*, such as Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and the working poor, also tend to be those who are most vulnerable *financially*. It is as if the very same individuals were on *both* trolley tracks.

It is well known that Americans respond far more easily to rare forms of harm suffered by individuals than to commonplace ones known only through statistics. Heroic efforts to save Thai Boy Scouts trapped in a cave (an incident that captured worldwide attention in 2018; see Beech, Paddock, and Suhartono 2018) or children with rare diseases seem to require no calculation of expense — unlike the public response to car crashes or diabetes. Probabilistic deaths are harder to grasp in terms of personal tragedy and heroic interventions (and of course it is harder to see one’s own contribution to large scale effects such as climate change). This may be why, in terms of the Doctrine of Double Effect, they are easier to think of as merely “letting die” rather than “killing.” In other words, the relative acceptability of common disease deaths across a population

over individual misfortunes may be due to the sense that they are the result of merely letting events take their course (death that just happens to result when I divert the trolley car) rather than purposely undertaking an action (pushing the man onto the tracks).

Some have claimed this is a universal cognitive bias. Whether or not this is the case, the bias is surely amplified and reinforced by the American ideology of individual autonomy (see Cohen, this volume). Discrete events are easily assimilated to the view that the actions of individuals have distinct and identifiable consequences, and that other individuals can actively respond to them. Direct action foregrounds the first-person perspective. We can see this even in the dynamics of the intensive care unit. According to one medical ethicist, doctors compete with one another for scarce ventilators because “each doctor’s patient is more important than the other guy’s patient” (quoted in Guarino 2020). Probabilities elude this sense of agency, leaving the individual to fend for himself or herself against forces that lie beyond human responsibility.

When Senator Johnson blithely remarks, “getting coronavirus is not a death sentence except for maybe no more than 3.4 percent of our population,” he is taking advantage of the distancing effects of probabilistic reason. Lieutenant Governor Patrick translates probability into the ideologically powerful language of American self-reliance. Invoking the logic of self-sacrifice and ignoring the risk he poses to others, he insists (speaking with the hypothetical collective voice of the elderly) that “we can take care of ourselves” in order to oppose the claims of social provisioning and mutual obligation. Paul Bettencourt, a Texas state senator, criticized a proposed stay-at-home order for Houston (whose own libertarian ethos has made it the largest city in the country with no zoning regulations), asking “why are you not asking for voluntary compliance from the public in the spirit of American liberty and Texas friendship?” (Downen 2020; Hooks 2020). Seen this way, a stoic willingness to distinguish between killing and letting die becomes a matter of national identity, all the more patriotic because, seemingly, more hard-headed. Ironically, it is a collective identity that in significant ways denies the collectivity.

The pandemic debates express in accentuated form a more general feature of how Americans think about economy and society. Many Americans tend to resist the idea of formal controls over the distribution of health care. At its starkest, they see such controls as leading to “death panels,” small elites deciding who lives and who dies — this is one accusation the right wing made against President Obama’s steps toward universal health-care coverage. But fearing *active* interventions, those

who fear death panels seem not even to notice that America already has a rationing system, albeit a *passive* one: the marketplace. The agency of the economy is so displaced and naturalized as to be invisible (this seems to hold for *both* sides of the debate sketched out above). It seems to function without anyone needing to take action. This is the logic that allows Americans to reject “death panels” and yet accept the rationing of health care when it is carried out by privatized insurance and medical institutions. Actively making choices looks too much like “killing.” In contrast, submitting to the marketplace can be assimilated to merely “letting die.”

Acknowledgments

This paper was written during a period of research leave funded by the Institute for Advanced Study and the University of Michigan. I am grateful to my fellow 2019–20 members of the Institute for their comradeship and insights. An earlier, shorter version of this essay appeared in the “Pandemic Diaries” edited Gabriela Manley, Bryan M. Dougan, and Carole McGranahan (Keane 2020).

References

- Anderson, Elizabeth S. 1995. *Value in Ethics and Economics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Beech, Hannah, Richard C. Paddock, and Muktita Suhartono. 2018. “‘Still Can’t Believe It Worked’: The Story of the Thailand Cave Rescue.” *New York Times*, July 12, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/world/asia/thailand-cave-rescue-seals.html>.
- Case, Anne, and Angus Deaton. 2020. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, Lawrence. 2020. “The Culling: Pandemic, Gerocide, Generational Affect.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 34 (4): 542–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12627>.
- Cole, Brendan. 2020. “Fox News’ Brit Hume Defends Risking Older People’s Lives ‘to Allow the Economy to Move Forward’ in Coronavirus Shutdown.” *Newsweek*, March 25, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/britt-hume-dan-patrick-tucker-carlson-fox-older-people-1494107>.

- Cuomo, Andrew (@NYGovCuomo). 2020. "My mother is not expendable. Your mother is not expandable." Twitter, March 24, 2020, 5:43 p.m. <https://twitter.com/nygovcuomo/status/1242477029083295746?lang=en>.
- Downen, Robert (@RobDownenChron). 2020. "Sen. Paul Bettencourt wants to know why Harris County leaders are adopting a stay-home order." Twitter, March 24, 2020, 3:13 p.m. <https://twitter.com/RobDownenChron/status/1242439334680297473>.
- Eldridge, Keith. 2020. "We Can't Rule Anything In or Out,' Inslee Says for COVID-19 Outbreak Measures." *Komo News*, March 18, 2020. <https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/we-cant-rule-anything-in-or-out-inslee-says-for-COVID-19-outbreak-measures>.
- EPA (United States Environmental Protection Agency). 2020. "Mortality Risk Valuation." EPA, updated November 20, 2020. <https://www.epa.gov/environmental-economics/mortality-risk-valuation>.
- Fassin, Didier. 2018. *Life: A Critical User's Manual*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Feinberg, Kenneth R. 2005. *What is Life Worth? The Unprecedented Effort to Compensate the Victims of 9/11*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Foot, Philippa. 1967. "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect." *Oxford Review*, no. 5: 5–15.
- Fourcade, Marion. 2016. "Ordinalization: Lewis A. Coser Memorial Award for Theoretical Agenda Setting 2014." *Sociological Theory* 34 (3): 175–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275116665876>.
- Gilbert, Craig. 2020. "Sen. Ron Johnson Is Telling People to Keep Coronavirus in Perspective." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 18, 2020. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/analysis/2020/03/18/coronavirus-sen-ron-johnson-says-keep-outbreak-perspective/5074145002/>.
- Guarino, Ben. 2020. "New York's Bioethics Experts Prepare for a Wave of Difficult Decisions." *Washington Post*, March 28, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/new-yorks-bioethics-experts-prepare-for-a-wave-of-difficult-decisions/2020/03/28/4501f522-7045-11ea-a3ec-70d7479d83f0_story.html.
- Hennessy-Fiske, Molly. 2020. "Sacrifice the Old to Help the Economy? Texas Official's Remark Prompts Backlash." *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-24/coronavirus-texas-dan-patrick>.
- Hooks, Christopher. 2020. "Dan Patrick to Dan Patrick: Drop Dead." *Texas Monthly*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/dan-patrick-coronavirus-tucker-carlson/>.

- Keane, Webb. 2016. *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Keane, Webb. 2020. "Your Money or Your Life: The Virus, the Economy, and the Trolley Problem." In "Pandemic Diaries," edited by Gabriela Manley, Bryan M. Dougan, and Carole McGranahan, *American Ethnologist* website, April 21, 2020. <https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/pandemic-diaries/your-money-or-your-life-the-virus-the-economy-and-the-trolley-problem>.
- Kellogg Insight*. 2020. "Containing COVID-19 will Devastate the Economy: Here's the Economic Case for Why It's Still Our Best Option, Based on Research of Martin Eichenbaum, Sergio Rebelo, and Mathias Trabandt." *Kellogg Insight*, March 26, 2020. <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/economic-cost-coronavirus-recession-COVID-deaths>.
- Keynes, John Maynard. 1923. *A Tract on Monetary Reform*. London: Macmillan.
- Law, Tara. 2020. "California City Official Ousted after Saying COVID-19 Could 'Fix' Burdens on Society if Allowed to Spread." *Time*, May 3, 2020. <https://time.com/5831424/california-city-official-ousted-COVID-19-fix-society-antioch/>.
- Lewis, Matt. 2020. "The Party of Life Embraces Trump's Death Cult." *Daily Beast*, March 25, 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-party-of-life-embraces-trumps-gdp-death-cult>.
- Lin, Rong-Gong II, Luke Money, Soumya Karlamangla, and Alex Wigglesworth. 2021. "Ambulance Crews Told not to Transport Patients who Have Little Chance of Survival." *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-04/los-angeles-hospitals-cannot-keep-up-COVID-19-surge-illness>.
- Liu, Andrew. 2020. "Chinese Virus, World Market." *N+1*, March 20, 2020. <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/chinese-virus-world-market/>.
- Livingston, Abby. 2020. "Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick Says a Failing Economy is Worse than Coronavirus." *Texas Tribune*, March 23, 2020. <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/03/23/texas-lt-gov-dan-patrick-says-bad-economy-worse-coronavirus/>.
- Lukes, Steven. 1997. "Comparing the Incomparable: Trade-Offs and Sacrifices." In *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, edited by Ruth Chang, 184–95. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morris, Alice, and Robert T. Garrett. 2020. "Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick Spurns Shelter in Place, Urges Return to Work, Suggests Grandparents

- Should Sacrifice.” *Dallas Morning News*, March 23, 2020, updated March 24, 2020. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/public-health/2020/03/24/texas-lt-gov-dan-patrick-spurns-shelter-in-place-urges-return-to-work-says-grandparents-should-sacrifice/>.
- Patrick, Dan. 2020. “Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick on Tucker Carlson Tonight.” Dan Patrick Texas, Lieutenant Governor, March 23, 2020. <https://www.danpatrick.org/tucker-carlson-tonight-march-23-2020/>.
- Pollack, Harold. 2020. “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Decides.” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/27/economy-public-health-virus/?arc404=true>.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2011. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Reich, Robert. 2020. “Ignore the Bankers — the Trump Economy Is Not Worth More Coronavirus Deaths.” *Guardian*, March 29, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/29/bankers-trump-economy-coronavirus-deaths?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.
- Richardson, Reed. 2020. “Glenn Beck Thinks Older Americans Should Go Back to Work: ‘Even If We All Get Sick, I’d Rather Die than Kill the Country.’” *Media Itte*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.mediaite.com/news/glenn-beck-issues-call-for-older-americans-to-go-back-to-work-even-if-we-all-get-sick-id-rather-die-than-kill-the-country/>.
- Servello, Adriana, and Evaristo Ettore. 2020. “COVID-19: The Italian Viral ‘Gerocide’ of the 21st Century.” *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, no. 89: 104111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2020.104111>.
- Thompson, Judith J. 1976. “Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem.” *Monist* 59 (2): 204–17. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist197659224>.
- Thompson, Judith J. 1985. “The Trolley Problem.” *Yale Law Journal* 94 (6): 1395–415. <https://doi.org/10.2307/796133>.
- Wexler, Celia V. 2020. “Coronavirus has Donald Trump and Dan Patrick Ready to Sacrifice Older People.” *NBC News Think*, March 26, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-has-donald-trump-dan-patrick-ready-sacrifice-older-people-ncna1169126>.
- Zelizer, Viviana. 1994. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.