

Compassion and sacrifice during COVID-19

By Felix Stein

This article is part of the series: Dispatches from the pandemic

COVID-19 highlights the limits of compassion and the need for sacrifice in contemporary capitalism

Compassion with the leader

When the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was hospitalized over COVID-19, the conservative TV commentator Piers Morgan got very angry. The host of the popular television show *Good Morning Britain* chastised “those people on social media” who had allegedly mocked and abused the PM online. Morgan also lamented that some people in the British public seemed not to “find it in themselves to be positive for the Prime Minister”, so he asked them to “just shut up”.

Morgan’s indignation echoed a general stance in the UK. The majority of British press commentators clearly expressed compassion for the PM as he was fighting for his life. Many people seemed to identify with Johnson’s suffering and some, such as philosopher A.C. Graylin, expressed the principled conviction that “one wishes well to anyone ill”. Several commentators also worried about the UK’s temporary loss of leadership, concerned that without the PM national cohesion would be undermined. On the whole, public reactions to Boris’s illness were very much in line with the high rank that compassion took in UK public opinion polls around that time.

However, the minority voicing a lack of compassion with the PM also argued their case. They held that Johnson had been a poor role model and a mediocre leader during the ongoing pandemic. He had been downplaying the threat of COVID-19 by insisting publicly on shaking hands until the early days of March 2020. His government had to be pressured by the public into adopting a strategy that focuses on actively saving lives rather than passively hoping for potential population immunity. Lastly, Johnson’s Tory party has been notorious

for underinvesting in UK public health, rendering UK health spending lower than that of similarly wealthy countries. Prospective reasons that Johnson's illness could have potentially positive effects were also given. For example, the co-host of *Good Morning Britain*, Susanna Reid tried to assuage Morgan's anger by expressing her hope that the PM's illness might "alert more and more people that this disease does not discriminate".

The UK's fiery public debate about whether or not compassion for the PM ought to be the order of the day should not be settled by one side "just shutting up" about it. As psychologist Paul Bloom (2016) has recently argued, compassion is not just a feeling. Contrary to empathy, compassion involves rational deliberation. It can be fostered or weakened, justified or undermined through arguments.

Bloom's partially rationalistic understanding of compassion opens up a threefold role for anthropologists during the ongoing pandemic. They may want to empirically study compassion as a value, asking what place it holds in different socio-cultural settings, whether and how it may be created or diminished and how it links to other values. Secondly, they can assess whether the arguments made in favor or against compassion are actually logically sound. Third, anthropologists can comment on whether people who claim to foster compassion either in word or deed are in fact living up to it.

Each of these three potential goals of anthropological study – conceptual clarification, assessment of the rationale behind given values, and assessment of thoughts and actions in light of a given value – is particularly urgent at the moment. People around the world are forced to rethink many, if not most activities of their daily lives, and policy makers continue to rule with little accountability in a global state of emergency. This makes COVID-19 a generative moment, in so far as it drastically opens up a multitude of new potential social realities (Kapferer 2010), be they political, epistemic or moral.

Retrospective reasons people lack compassion for those who fall ill on the basis that they may have "deserved" disease for their assumed misbehavior are generally hard to justify. As anthropological analysis has shown numerous times, we can never know other people's behavior fully. Johnson, for example may have been reckless with respect to COVID-19 because he was ill-informed about the disease. Moreover, sources of agency and of moral responsibility often surpass the intentional individual, making individual attributions of blame much more problematic than they tend to seem at first (Laidlaw 2010). Lastly, the UK

legal system is, at least in theory, built on the basis that nobody should be punished with disease for what we may consider immoral or illegal conduct – even if the actual lack of protection against infectious disease for prisoners puts commitments to uphold this principle into ever more serious doubt.

Prospective reasons people lack compassions for others are much harder to assess and they are currently widespread. For example, compassion quickly meets its limits in discussions about which health risks may or may not be inevitable in people's daily lives if economic activity is not to be reduced or otherwise changed too much. In the UK, arguments about the tension of balancing lives with (capitalist) livelihoods make frequent reference to the idea of “sacrifice”. NHS staff is being celebrated for sacrificing their own lives for the sake of others, the UK government considers adherence to the nationwide lockdown a laudable sacrifice by the British public, and life with COVID-19 in the medium to long term is deemed to require even more sacrifice in the future.

Sacrificing low-paid workers

The fact that sacrifice is one of the key concepts that currently determines the limits of compassion should not be surprising. It points to the pervasiveness of economic thought in public discourse, as the idea of sacrifice features heavily in classical and neo-classical theories of exchange, value and labour (Rajan 2015). Taking the notion of sacrifice in economics seriously for a moment, we can see that capitalism requires quite a lot of it: While global life-expectancy has increased dramatically over the past century, it is also true that most people on the planet will at some point either suffer or die for capitalism to persist. The primacy of growth and our reliance on fossil fuels mean that ambient air pollution poisons and kills millions of people every year. Road injuries, which are frequently work-related, equally feature in the worlds' top 10 global causes of death. Add to this the unhealthy working conditions of most monetized labour as well as the risk of mass migration due to climate change and it becomes clear that capitalism as we know it requires human sacrifice. It is in many instances an economic system marked by necropolitics.

Capitalist human sacrifice happens to be unequally distributed. While wealthy groups and individuals can shelter themselves from the economy's negative health effects, the existential and economic precarity of most workers leads them to have a lower average life expectancy. This is true on a global scale, where people born in countries with lower GDP and higher

social inequality tend to lead shorter lives. It is also true on a national scale. In England for example, life expectancy between the wealthiest 20% and the poorest 20% of people differs by almost eight and a half years.

COVID-19 highlights and amplifies both capitalism's need for sacrifice and the unequal distribution thereof along class lines. In England, the disease spreads at a faster rate in deprived areas. The pandemic also affects low-income households the most in economic terms. On a global scale, COVID-19 moves steadily from rich countries with the means to do something about it, to lower income countries with little room for policy manoeuvre and long histories of systematically inflicting disease on people (COVID-19 is likely already much more widespread in Low Income Countries than we think, but testing remains limited).

In the UK, the tension between compassion and sacrifice currently puts the government into a bind. Leading British politicians have long eschewed the important question what kinds of work may be both personally meaningful and socially useful. COVID-19 obliged it to rapidly address this question and to publish a list of critical workers, essential to fighting the disease and to keeping society running. Critical workers who are paid the least – cleaners, teachers, nurses and security guards for example – also tend to be the ones who cannot work from home and run the highest risks of COVID-19 infections. The British PM has since applauded critical workers for their compassion, yet in defining them as relevant to the system, his government actively takes the risk of sacrificing their health. Thereby, the pervasive economic idea that all work requires sacrifice is elevated to a level of life-threatening intensity, mostly for people with low incomes. Stacking supermarket shelves while customers are around requires employees to expose themselves and their families to a considerable risk of illness, maybe even death.

Questioning capitalist sacrifice to find the “new normal”

Over the past few weeks, economists, health experts, politicians and the British public have tentatively begun to define future economic normality. They are experimenting with different sets of physical distancing, surveillance and hygiene policies to see how a balance between social life and mass illness can be found. To get the balance right and to build the compassionate society that the British public seems to value we may want to question the pervasive rhetoric of sacrifice, as it can all too easily facilitate a system of market eugenics. Four broad insights from the anthropology of sacrifice may serve as a starting point.

Firstly, we may want to consider sacrifice to be a means of communication between the worlds of the sacred and the profane, through the mediation of a victim that is destroyed in the process (Hubert & Mauss 1964). Here, the sphere of the sacred remains somewhat autonomous from human behavior. The sacred influences human lives but humans have a hard time influencing it. This is not the case for capitalism or the fight against COVID-19. Both can be rendered less life-threatening through a variety of measures other than sacrifice, for example government honesty, equipment for health workers, serious public efforts at mass-testing and contact tracing, higher pay for low-pay workers and transport options that allow for physical distancing whilst getting to work. A discourse that focuses on sacrifice underplays these alternative modes of bringing about change, which do not involve rendering social inequality more life-threatening for the working poor.

Secondly, not all sacrifices are lived out in public. Instead, people's lives can be marked by hidden sacrifices of constant self-giving (Mayblin 2014). Asking critical workers to work during times of a global pandemic and providing them with applause, rather than greater socio-economic security in return means being concerned with exposed acts of sacrifice. It underplays forms of non-performative sacrifice in the public at large and ignores whether they already constitute a burden on people or how this burden might best be reduced. The tension between performed appreciation of and actual long-term disinterest in the sacrifices that people may be making day by day, opens UK government policy to accusations of cynicism.

Thirdly, sacrifice tends to presuppose pre-existing debt-relationships. As such, it may be conceived of as a subset of gift-giving, which invokes mutual obligations, or as reflecting unconditional indebtedness towards whatever entity one is giving oneself to (Willerslev 2011). Today it remains unclear whether critical workers in the UK consider themselves to be in either of these two positions. Are they being asked to sacrifice themselves for each other, for the government, for the nation, or for a mode of production? And do they consider themselves to be indebted to any of these entities? Recent polls suggest that large parts of the underpaid may share feelings of abandonment and a lack of faith in the political and economic system. If this is so, then discourses of sacrifice will not fall on fertile ground.

Lastly, sacrifice tends to be an expression of wider collective sensibilities. It is at times hard to understand for cultural outsiders but may seem perfectly natural for people accustomed to

it (Geertz 1977). Most people reading this text will not be perfect strangers to capitalism and its different forms of sacrifice. So our main problem is not to understand what is culturally alien to us, but to alienate ourselves from harm and death that have long been a naturalized. Going through such alienation will require a substantive amount of critical work. In so far as millions of lives depend on it, it may be worth our while.

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