From lockdown to rāhui and teddy bears in windows

Initial responses to Covid-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Fig. 1. A home-made banner that appeared in Green Bay, Auckland soon after lockdown was announced.

1. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, as elsewhere, the political situation in response to Covid-19 is rapidly shifting. My analysis here focuses on the 49-day March-May 2020 nationwide lockdown, as well as the days leading up to this event.

2. This continued even after a vocal public outcry in mid-May 2020 against the passing of a legislation enabling the police to gain warrantless entry into homes and marae (Māori meeting houses) during alert level 2. Notably, concerns raised by the opposition party and the public during an election year led to a quick amendment of the legislation. The police project a similar image of ‘friendly’ policing during the second major lockdown in August 2020, with the new police commissioner, Andrew Coster, stating, ‘as has been our approach through the Covid response, our first focus will be on educating people and ensuring they are aware of the new restrictions’ (Leak 2020).

3. The first public protest against lockdown measures took place on 13 August 2020 (day two of the second major lockdown) and was relatively small in size, with an estimated 60 participants.

4. My analysis here is shaped by discussions with friends, family, colleagues and students of their experiences during lockdown, reports from mainstream media and online commentaries posted in response. I also collected material via walking ethnographies (Pink 2008), i.e. visual and other sensory observations made while taking a daily (1-2 hour) walk through my immediate West Auckland neighbourhood and, once lockdown restrictions shifted, through the surrounding area. Since late April 2020, I have been involved in a multi-partner research project collecting first-person accounts of life under lockdown, using both survey and interview methods, which also informs this discussion.

Be it Giorgio Agamben’s (2005: 11) widely repeated warning that the state of exception has become ‘the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics’ or Michel Foucault’s (2004: 47) trenchant analysis of how the 18th-century response to the plague initiated ‘the political dream of an exhaustive, unobstructed power … exercised to the full’, scholarly examinations of states of emergency frequently underscore how the crisis imaginary (Koselleck 2006; Roitman 2013) is employed to rapidly and unjustifiably expand state power.

Under the mantle of humanitarian protection, governments, including democracies, are described as ushering in authoritarian rule while simultaneously shoring up the interests of elites and the private sector (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010). Early examinations of states of emergency declared in response to Covid-19 have proved no exception (e.g. Chomsky 2020; Matthewman & Hippatzt 2020), with Agamben (2020) himself proclaiming in late February 2020 that Italy’s Covid-19 state of emergency was an exercise in government manipulation.

This line of analysis affords great insight into the potential misuse of state power. It also, however, frequently suggests that states of emergency are somehow inherently unjustifiable (Scarry 2011). It furthermore tends to depict the citizenry as either weak and overwhelmed, or, at best, duped by the workings of the state, thus ignoring the possibility of democratic processes continuing within, and shaping, states of emergency (Honig 2009).

New Zealand’s response to Covid-19

Aotearoa/New Zealand’s initial response to Covid-19, including its March-May 2020 lockdown, demonstrates how states of emergency need to be analyzed as more complex than mere top-down impositions and expansions of state power. A closer look at citizen-state dynamics during this period reveals a collaborative dynamic in which the citizenry actively engaged in constituting a state of emergency. Taking place in a society often lauded as being at the forefront of embracing neo-liberal individualism, the speed and ease with which the national lockdown occurred in Aotearoa/New Zealand suggests the need for a broader examination of how collective responsibility, care and blame are envisioned and enacted, not only by governments but by (advanced liberal) citizenries (cf. Appadurai 2020; Trnka & Trundle 2017).

In the days leading up to the unprecedented national state of emergency and 49-day ‘level 3 and 4 lockdown’, many New Zealanders were not only prepared for, but welcomed the emergency measures.1 National news media had been saturated with dramatic daily updates on Covid-19’s global spread since late January 2020. Public debate prior to the lockdown was dominated by medical and public health professionals and others calling on the government to take action. Some segments of society were already independently taking steps to self-isolate – for example, office workers and university staff began working from home. School principals reported a plummet in attendance at the start of the week (Monday 23 March), with many parents ‘locking down’ before the alert levels were even announced.

When it came, the national lockdown, which took effect at 11.59pm on 25 March 2020, was the broadest enactment of state power Aotearoa/New Zealand had ever experienced. The government’s stated objective was to ‘contain Covid’ – specifically, to halt community transmission (an objective that was, in fact, achieved for 102 days running, lasting well after the nationwide lockdown was lifted). At alert levels 3 and 4, the government closed all schools and non-essential businesses and required all members of the public to stay at home unless purchasing essential supplies, seeking medical assistance, travelling to work in the case of key workers or exercising. For most people, face-to-face social interaction was to be limited to members of one’s own household or so-called ‘bubbles’. With initially minimal police presence, and no enforcement by the military, a successful lockdown required citizen participation.

For many in Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly those left behind in the government, including its assessments of appropriate emergency regulations, has been shaped by the popularity of the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, who is widely viewed as actively promoting the values of care, empathy and compassion. ‘Jacindamania’ or the so-called ‘Jacinda effect’ had taken root long before Covid-19. Indeed, at the start of the pandemic, Jacinda Ardern’s popularity rating was around 42 per cent, as compared to the 11 per cent reached by the then leader of the opposition, Simon Bridges (McDonald 2020). Citizenries’ affective inclinations towards individual political leaders do not unilaterally determine their responses to government directives, but, as Michelle Munyikwa (2020) notes with respect to the United States, we cannot overlook how previous levels of trust or scepticism in government shape the Covid-19 crisis.

That said, the Labour-led government clearly had its work cut out for it. Early on, criticisms were raised as to the lockdown’s unequal effects. The definition of ‘essential services’, for example, was shown to clearly financially benefit some (large) businesses more than others (e.g. food supply monopolies as opposed to small grocers, fruit and vegetable shops or independent butchers). In the face of such visible inequalities, as well as potential criticisms of the radical, unprecedented suspension of civil liberties, Ardern’s government worked hard to transform the affective landscape of the lockdown and recast a top-down directive into a positive, collective enterprise.

On top of providing significant economic support for employees of businesses impacted by the lockdown, the government embarked on a concerted mass media campaign to conjure up goodwill among citizens. Messages on the radio, TV and print flyers that appeared in letterboxes proclaimed, ‘we are all in it together’, exhorting New Zealanders to ‘unite against Covid-19’. The prime minister’s speeches were peppered with references to positive col-
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Fig. 2. One of the more inventive displays of stuffed animals and toys intended to inspire ‘care’ and ‘hope’ during lockdown.
Resisting lockdown

At the same time, there were attempts to push back against both lockdown regulations and the growing tide of national sentiment. Surfers defied the swimming ban. In some parts of Auckland, school grounds which were officially closed to the public, had their running tracks, cricket pitches and tennis courts fully occupied. Amongst the plethora of ‘comforting’ stuffed animals emerged subversive images, including a sunbathing bear making the most of the lockdown ‘holiday’ (at a time when sitting on the beach was banned) and two bears dressed in police uniform, portraying the simultaneously caring and surveilling state. These images and activities not only disrupted the state’s claims that being ‘all in it together’ necessarily equated to staying homebound, but were also indicative of a different emotional tenor, refuting assertions of the ‘emergency’ nature of the ‘state of emergency’ and promoting outdoor leisure activities as ‘per normal’ in the face of the so-called ‘new normal’.

It is difficult to know how widespread such disruptive sentiments were. Several of the major news outlets had become mouthpieces for government messages of solidarity, reminding New Zealanders to ‘stay safe’ and ‘be kind’. On mainstream media, critiques of the government were outweighed by cooking recommendations and tips for alleviating social isolation. While the impact of the lockdown, as well as public sentiment, varied across different constituencies along axes of class, ethnic identity and gender as well as household composition and representation in essential service occupations (Trnka et al. n.d.; see also Napier 2020), discourse and survey material of New Zealanders’ attitudes during lockdown were dominated by expressions of support for the emergency measures and trust in government decision-making (Long et al. 2020; Sibley et al. 2020). Critiques and disruptions thus not only revealed resistance, but underscored the breadth of public effort that went into consensus building.

While much has been made of the promience of neo-liberal individualism in societies such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, individualism, when it occurs, is enabled by the enactment of a myriad of interpersonal, collective and state-citizen obligations (Trnka & Trundle 2017). Doubt, dissent or antagonism towards government do not necessarily rupture long-founded views of the state as the final possible site for securing protection and/or justice. In what I have referred to elsewhere as a ‘politics of last resort’, the state is often turned to even when it is distrusted (Trunka 2017; see also Aretxaga 2003). The state-citizen contract thus remains a powerful ideal, even if it is constantly undermined, and perhaps even more so during times of crisis (Fassin & Vasquez 2005).

Conclusion

Now more than ever, it is vital for scholarly analyses to interrogate the public’s affective engagements with the state, assessing the collaborative construction of notions of collective responsibility, obligation, community and care. Examining a time period in Aotearoa/New Zealand when ‘failure’ to contain the virus was posited as almost unthinkable, it is crucial to recognize how compliance, success and fault were constituted, not only by the government, but by members of the general public. Such an analysis will not only reveal more of the complexities of state-citizen relations during times of crisis, but will also illuminate the implications for those who are judged to be ‘non-compliant’ and who – in today’s, as well as future states of emergency – may end up becoming the targets of a backlash and collective blame.