Health Organization released its guidelines, the Portuguese government presented its proposal in parliament; four days later it was approved, and the day after that it was promulgated by the president. While such processual speed is impressive, what problems might arise from this?

The first inmates were released on Easter Saturday, two days after the president committed his signature. How can such a complicated process be adequately evaluated and considered within two days, taking into account all the factors at stake? Prison authorities need to inform inmates, inmates may need to sign documents, their families need to be consulted and arrangements made in each individual case. Instead of an organized release, however, media reported that dozens of inmates were simply given one day’s notice and left at the prison gate, with their possessions in a handbag or a bin bag. Some were without any means of transport at a time when social distancing measures and restrictions on movement were already in place and public transport services restricted. Indeed, there were formidable obstacles to the simple task of returning to their homes. No other measures accompanied the release of inmates besides the distribution of face masks and gloves to prison officers and correctional staff.

Was this what Portuguese inmate support associations had in mind when they proclaimed the need for a humanitarian solution for the prison population during this epidemic? With no capacity to monitor inmates after their release – and considering that the severity of the pandemic affects all spheres of society, but especially the most vulnerable – was this an effective way to protect anyone?

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At a time when ‘social distancing’ is being advanced as the most effective tool to control this contagious disease, the state cannot absolve itself from its responsibility towards prisoners by simply pushing them out. This raises questions as to what impact such a sudden release might have and how it might be seen to benefit inmates and the broader community.

It also leads one to question whether there are ways in which social distancing might be achievable within existing prison settings. Portuguese law asserts the right to individual cells for each prisoner. However, few inmates benefit from this, as the overwhelming majority share their cell with at least one or two other people, in some cases larger dormitories being the rule.

Could this exceptional release, in itself, resolve the prevailing overcrowding situation? We might suppose that transfers could alleviate overcrowding by removing particularly vulnerable inmates (age, underlying health conditions, etc.) from unsafe conditions into prison hospitals or similar institutions. Also, in some prisons, it may be possible to adjust daily routines – meals, time in the yard, etc. However, prison authorities cannot observe social distancing guidelines in settings where lockdown is the rule and not the exception.

So although in theory, social distancing might be achievable in prison settings, in practice, it is quite impossible.

The current pandemic inverts some of our standard preconceptions regarding prison settings, confinement and security. We view ‘criminals’ as constituting a threat to the community, and prisons as places in which to confine them. However, while the Portuguese people go into quarantine to protect themselves from the pandemic, the country’s authorities have suddenly begun to release prisoners, without much detailed reflection or consideration, posing enormous risks to both prisoners and society.

While the early release of prisoners would usually be vetoed, they are now being released, in a vulnerable state, as part of a political agenda – in effect abandoning rather than liberating them – in a global pandemic emergency.

STRUGGLING FOR FOOD IN A TIME OF CRISIS
A comment on Caplan (see pp 8-10 in this issue)

Pat Caplan’s stimulating and timely article details the food insecurity crisis in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. I concur with all that she has said, but here want to add more critical context.

Caplan alludes to cuts in the food and health sectors. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and driven by an ideology of the small regulation economy, the government made severe cuts to the National Health Service (NHS) and welfare services (Caraher & Furey 2018; Taylor-Gooby 2012). These effectively dismantled the already inadequate safety nets for health and social care. Those now championing the NHS and welfare care services also delivered these cuts and left us in a state of unpreparedness (Buck 2019; Caraher 2019). All this has been part of the privatization or ‘charitzation’ of state welfare, driving it back to not just Victorian but Elizabethan times, with restrictive access to food through charity and the re-emergence of concepts of the deserving and undeserving poor (Thane 2018).

Caplan put it that the very existence of food banks ‘conveys the message that “something is being done”’. The Covid-19 crisis exposes the frailty of the current corporatized system of food provision to vulnerable groups through food banks. With between six to eight people food insecure for every two users, food banks are the ‘canary in the mine’. Even in the ‘best of times’, food banks cannot meet the needs of all who are food insecure (Barrie 2019; Caplan 2016). During the present Covid-19 crisis, the UK government is handing over food supply to the already powerful retailers, when it could, for example, have used hospitality outlets for community food hubs, as with ‘national kitchens’ in World War II as described by Caplan.

Caplan also referred to rationing and World War II. Rationing involves central government food control and the levelling out of inequalities (Hammond 1951). Food control includes not just the delivery of food, but the procurement of goods, creating stocks of critical foods, controlling prices on the stock market and nationalizing all restaurants. In WWII there was a strong presence of the state in food control, all in the public interest.

While some hospitality companies have re-established themselves by serving takeaway food to NHS and key workers, the majority have ceased trading. The government has thus neglected the vast collection of skills and facilities to feed communities. Other solutions, such as the provision of vouchers to those entitled to free school meals have, like the introduction of Universal Credit, proved not fit for purpose, with delays in processing, not everyone receiving their vouchers and some voucher not wanting to cash tills, thus showing a lack of planning.

Already burdened by Covid-19, low-paid workers are often only one pay cheque away from disaster and credit card or payday loans as their only options. In the first weeks of the crisis, one in five families suffered a financial hit by taking out loans (Food Foundation 2020). Nurses, healthcare assistants, shop assistants and delivery drivers count as key workers.
CARMELO LISÓN TOLONASA (1929-2020)

Carmelo Lisón Tolosana (1929-2020) was a major figure in European social anthropology, having played a central role in Spain and across Europe as a promoter of our discipline. He was part of a generation of Spaniards who were too young to fight in the civil war but not too young to feel its direct effects. Having originally trained at a seminary, he then graduated in history at the University of Zaragoza and found his vocation in the social sciences, largely inspired by the work of José Ortega y Gasset. Fascinated by the new developments that were taking place in British social anthropology in the 1960s, Carmelo registered at University College London to do a PhD. He found out, however, that his plan to study Spanish society was not welcomed there. As a result, together with the Portuguese scholar José Cutileiro, he moved to Oxford, where J.G. Peristiany was cultivating a group of brilliant young Mediterraneanists at St Antony’s College. At Oxford, however, both Cutileiro and Lisón Tolosana found greater support and encouragement in John K. Campbell, then a young post-doctoral researcher at the college, than in any of the older members of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, who shared with their London colleagues a deep primitivist prejudice against anthropological research in Europe.

Carmelo’s thesis – later published as Belmonte de los Caballeros: A sociological study of a Spanish town (1966) – is one of the major works of European ethnography of the period and remains fascinating reading today. The book deals with the small town in Aragón where Carmelo was raised, addressing very particularly the way in which the major upheaval of the civil war marked differently the world view and sense of self-identity of successive generations. Due to their close collaboration, the book brilliantly brings together on the one hand, Carmelo’s inspiration in Ortega’s phenomenological sociology and, on the other, Campbell’s inspiration in Parsonian cultural anthropology. Every year – with the financial support of a wealthy childhood companion and dedicated collaborator for the rest of their long lives. In the mid-1960s, Franco’s regime was experimenting with a measure of modernization and liberalization. This meant that Carmelo ultimately managed to find a place at the prestigious Universidad Complutense in Madrid. In order to do that, however, he was obliged to write a second doctoral thesis, this time in Spanish. At the Complutense, he founded and directed first the Department of Sociology and then the Department of Anthropology. In the course of the decades that followed, he published a number of books on Galicia, where he carried out fieldwork in the 1970s, mostly researching themes associated with family patterns and magic. His latter work was deeply influenced by Lévi-Straussian structuralism and manifested his growing fascination with the transcendent side of human experience.

One of Carmelo’s greatest achievements was the role he played as a promoter of Iberian and European anthropology. Every year – with the financial support of a wealthy childhood friend – he organized a small conference. These restricted and intense meetings brought together a carefully chosen group of participants and normally took place in a distant and attractive venue or at the sumptuous setting of the Casa de Velázquez in Madrid. Having been a student of his lifelong friend, John Campbell, I was invited to many of these. There, I was given the occasion to meet some of the more important figures of European anthropology and I befriended Spanish and French colleagues with whom I have, since then, collaborated for a number of decades. All of us who were blessed with his discretion but decisive hospitality will fondly remember the intellectual intensity of these occasions. After retirement from the university, Carmelo’s intellectual base was the Royal Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in Madrid, where again he fostered actively anthropological debate. He was an Honorary Member of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

Carmelo was a believer in European anthropology and worked actively at promoting it. With his loss, we witness the passing of a generation of social thinkers who fought for the institution of the social sciences in the universities of southern Europe, and who created schools that are today alive, active and share their ecumenical outlook.

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