

Quarantine Colloquium 4

April 23, 2020

Dear Peucinians,

Bowdoin is abandoned, businesses are shuttered, and borders are closed. We venture outside only out of necessity, and when we do, we act as combatants, not proud citizens entering the public sphere. Family, friends, fellow citizens—all whom we hold dear have become our potential undoers. That we must meet tonight on Zoom, not in Massachusetts Hall, is enough to tell us that something has gone terribly wrong, that we have entered a new world, with new rules.

Resolved: Consider States of Exception

A forum presented by Ursula K. Le Guin '21

Constitutions can only be designed towards the extant and the expected. No document, nor any corpus of statutory or regulatory law, can provide for every possible circumstance. Inevitably, the impossible will arrive, and the procedures and processes upon which a state functions will become obsolete and unjustifiable. In states of exception, extra legal action—grounded only in the obscurity of the common good—is, and must be, required.

But what counts as a state of exception? In nations, crises erupt daily, yet nearly all are handled within the domain of law. To enter a new paradigm, how unique must the crisis be? How much life ought be in jeopardy? Are there any criteria we can lay out in advance, or are states of exception by their very nature undefinable and incalculable?

Moreover, who determines when a nation has entered a state of exception? Who can, and ought, lead a nation through its state of exception? Can we escape the Schmittian sovereign, or must we rely, in times of unrest and uncertainty, on an unchecked executive? And once it all ends, how can we return? Do states of exception pose merely temporary deviations from established modes and orders, or do they inevitably usher in, in the wake of crisis, wholly new modes and orders?

As COVID-19 bears down upon us, we are faced with the very real choices between peace and freedom, health and dignity. Our rights have been stripped from us, exposed for the flimsy constructs that they are, but the death toll has been diminished. Has all this been worth it? How much longer can we continue on? When will we stop laughing at the protestors, and instead go out to join them?

Thursday, April 23th, 7:45 PM

Your Computer

As Formal as you Please

Stay tuned for a Zoom link.

PLSH,

Elie Wiesel