



Introduction: Inverted Quarantine

Not that long ago, hardly a generation back, people did not worry about the food they ate. They did not worry about the water they drank or the air they breathed. It never occurred to them that eating, drinking water, satisfying basic, mundane bodily needs, might be dangerous things to do. Parents thought it was good for their kids to go outside, get some sun.

That is all changed now. People see danger everywhere. Food, water, air, sun. We cannot do without them. Sadly, we now also fear them. We suspect that the water that flows from the tap is contaminated with chemicals that can make us ill. We have learned that conventionally grown fruits and vegetables have pesticide residues and that when we eat meat from conventionally raised animals, we are probably getting a dose of antibiotics and hormones, too. Contaminants can be colorless, tasteless, and odorless, invisible to the senses, and that fact increases the feeling of vulnerability.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), indoor air is more toxic than outdoor air. That is because many household cleaning products and many contemporary home furnishings—carpets, drapes, the fabrics that cover sofas and easy chairs, furniture made of particle board—outgas toxic volatile organic chemicals. OK, we will go outside . . . only to inhale diesel exhaust, particulates suspended in the air, molecules of toxic chemicals wafting from factory smokestacks.

Even sunshine is now considered by many a hazard. Expose yourself to too much sun and your skin will age prematurely. You risk

getting skin cancer. The ozone layer has thinned, making exposure to sunlight even more dangerous. The incidence of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, is on the rise.

The response has been swift. Everywhere one looks, Americans are buying consumer products that promise to reduce their exposure to harmful substances.

In 1975, Americans were drinking, on average, one gallon of bottled water per person per year. By 2005, the latest year for which we have data, consumption had grown to twenty-six gallons per person per year,¹ over seven and a half billion gallons of bottled water. Bottled water used to account for only a tiny fraction of beverage consumption, inconsequential when compared to soft drinks, coffee and tea, beer, milk, and juice. Today, after enjoying years of “enviable, unending growth,”² bottled water has become the “superstar [of] the beverage industry.”³ In addition, nearly half of all households use some kind of water filter in the home.

A couple of decades back, organic foods had only a tiny share of the overall food market. Organically grown foods were sold, typically, in small “health food” stores. They were hard to find, even if you wanted them. Few people did. But now, after years of 20 percent annual growth, organic food is mainstream. There are not only organic fruits and vegetables but organic breads and cereals, organic meat, fish, and dairy, organic beer, organic snack food. One can find organic foods in large, attractive, upscale chain stores, such as Whole Foods, and also increasingly in mainstream supermarkets. Safeway and Wal-Mart both sell organic foods.

Those who can afford it buy “organic” or “natural” personal hygiene products, shampoo, soap, makeup; “nontoxic” home cleaning products; clothing made of natural fibers; furniture made of real wood; and rugs made of natural fiber. There is a new ritual in America (at least in middle-class America): applying 30 SPF sunscreen to our children’s exposed skin every morning before they go to school, to summer camp, or to the beach.

A Resigned, Fatalistic Environmentalism

It struck me at some point that this was a strange, new, mutant form of environmentalism. There is awareness of hazard, a feeling of vulnerability, of being at risk. That feeling, however, does not lead to political action aimed at reducing the amounts or the variety of toxics present in the environment. It leads, instead, to individu-

alized acts of self-protection, to just trying to keep those contaminants out of one’s body. And that is not irrational if one feels that there is nothing to be done, that conditions will not change, cannot be changed. I think, therefore, that we can describe this as a resigned or fatalistic expression of environmental consciousness.

I also think something similar has happened in response to threatening social conditions. I detect it in the fact that millions of Americans have opted to live in gated communities or to move to exurbia, as far away from social problems as possible, away from the problems of the cities, from the manifestations and consequences of poverty, from deeply troubled race relations.

I detect it, too, in responses to the problems of the public school system. If one thinks it is broken and one cannot fix it, what does one do? Move to a neighborhood with good schools, if one can afford that. Start a charter school. Go private and support vouchers. Home school.

The Opposite of Social Movement

People respond to threat in different ways. One can engage actively with the issue: start or join an organization that campaigns for reforms that address the issue; support candidates who say they will vote for legislation that deals with the issue; e-mail congressmen and senators before key votes. One can organize, protest. That is the politically engaged, social movement/activism response. The kind of response to threat I am beginning to describe seems the very opposite of that.

An Individualized Response to Collective Threat

Social movements are collective in their goals and in their methods. They define problems as collective, and they say that only systemic change can fix them.⁴ If food has pesticide residues, antibiotics, and hormones in it, it is because of the way most crops are grown and most farm animals are raised in the United States. If tap water has in it hundreds of chemicals at low concentrations, it is because chemicals from farms, industry, and millions of households have been disposed of in ways that allow waste chemicals to find their way into rivers, lakes, and groundwater. Systemic threats require systemic solutions, something substantial, like raising crops differently, disposing of wastes better, and so forth.

Social movements embody the notion that solutions are achieved

only through collective means. Social movements exhort people to join with each other, to act together to (in Richard Flacks's apt and compelling phrase) Make History.⁵

In contrast, the kind of response to threat that I am interested in is individualistic in both goal and method. A person who, say, drinks bottled water or uses natural deodorant or buys only clothing made of natural fiber is not trying to change anything. All they are doing is trying to barricade themselves, individually, from toxic threat, trying to shield themselves from it. Act jointly with others? Try to change things? Make history? No, no. I'll deal with it individually. I'll just *shop* my way out of trouble.

A Consumeristic Response to Threat

To shield one's self from harm in this way inevitably requires the purchase of special items. The second obvious characteristic of this kind of response to threat, then, is that it is a consumeristic response. Faced with the same threat, another person might inform themselves more fully about the issue, join with like-minded folks, try to raise public awareness about the issue, try to get the political system to acknowledge it and deal with it. That is responding to trouble in the modality of *citizen in a democratic society*. A person who buys some products because those products promise to shield them from trouble is not at that moment a *political* actor. He or she is, instead, in the modality of *consumer*, responding to a felt need—in this case the need to be protected from harm—by buying certain goods that promise to satisfy that need.

"Inverted Quarantine"

As I began to understand that bottled water was just one example of a more general phenomenon, of a distinct type of social act, each instance of which has certain characteristics in common, I thought I needed to give it a *name*. After some reflection, I decided to call it *inverted quarantine*. I recognize that it is not a particularly felicitous expression, but the expression has the great benefit that it situates the new concept as similar to, but at the same time different from, something we know quite well, that is, *quarantine*, the public health measure that society has used for hundreds of years to contain the spread of infectious diseases.

The activity I was thinking about is similar to traditional quarantine in that it involves processes of separation and containment

to keep healthy individuals away from disease agents. But here is the difference: In its classic form, quarantine is based on the assumption that the overall collective environment is basically healthy. Risk comes from a discrete source, such as a diseased individual. The community protects public health by isolating the diseased individual(s), thereby reducing the likelihood that others will be exposed and the infection will spread. What if we inverted the dyadic opposition—healthy overall conditions / diseased individuals—upon which the logic of traditional quarantine rests? The new dyadic opposition would be diseased conditions / healthy individuals. The whole environment is toxic, illness-inducing. The threat is not discrete, is not just *here* or *there*, not just these persons and not others, so it is not possible to separate off the threat, to contain it, to quarantine it. Danger is everywhere. How are healthy individuals to protect themselves? They can do so only by *isolating themselves* from their disease-inducing surroundings, by erecting some sort of barrier or enclosure and withdrawing behind it or inside it. Hence the term inverted quarantine.⁶

Inverted Quarantine as a Mass Phenomenon

Inverted quarantine has a history. This way of responding to threat was "discovered" or "invented" long before anyone started to worry about toxic hazards in food and water. It was, first, a way of dealing with *social* threat.

If the essence of inverted quarantine is the act of erecting a barrier between self and threat, one can trace the practice back very far, indeed, probably to the earliest fixed human settlements where walls were put up around the perimeter to control who entered and, if necessary, to repel attack, and to the rise of significant social inequalities, which required ways inside settlements to separate ruling elites from everyone else. We might think of that as the "pre-history" of inverted quarantine, but of course that is qualitatively different from the contemporary form of it, which became possible only in the modern era, when individualistic modes of action flowered and economics took the form of commodity production.

In the industrial cities of the nineteenth century, wealthy elites relied on inverted quarantine methods to put distance between themselves and masses of urban poor and working people. It is telling that at the time the poor, the homeless, the unkempt, the desperate, and the unruly were referred to as "the dangerous classes."⁷

People of means could control their interactions with those less well off than themselves by either moving to the “country,” to one of the first exclusive suburbs built for the very rich,⁸ or if they stayed in town, by retreating behind walls and gates, frequenting only wealthy milieus, traveling in private carriages, and employing guards to physically keep members of the dangerous classes away from them.

Buying one’s way out of trouble, erecting barriers, separating and distancing one’s self from threatening social conditions were expensive. At first, only the truly wealthy, a tiny minority, could afford to use such means to shield themselves from trouble. Others, further down the class ladder, might have wished to emulate them but could not afford to do so. Today inverted quarantine has become a mass phenomenon. Millions—many millions—do it. Two distinct developmental trends, acting together, are responsible for this transformation from an elite practice to a mass phenomenon.

Downward Diffusion

Inverted quarantine could not become an option for many until either incomes rose or prices came down. In fact, both happened.

Economic development created a large and reasonably well-paid middle class of managers, professionals, and white-collar employees. For a time, even some blue-collar workers were paid well enough that they could make the inverted quarantine choice, at least some of the time.

At the same time, the price of some big-ticket inverted quarantine items fell. The suburban home is perhaps the best example. Once within the reach of only a small, privileged minority, a combination of causes, ranging from new construction methods to favorable federal home loan programs, lowered the cost of suburban home ownership to the point that millions could afford to buy one. Today at least half the population lives in a suburb.

Inverted Quarantine Applied to Toxic Environmental Threats

As people grew concerned about what polluted air, polluted water, and contaminated foods were doing to their bodies, the logic of inverted quarantine turned out to be readily transferable to dealing with environmental threats. Environmental protection is the new frontier for the practice of inverted quarantine.

Here, too, the combination of decent income and affordability fuels the growth of mass markets in inverted quarantine goods. True, some items cost much more than their conventionally made counterparts. An all-natural mattress can sell for thousands of dollars, way more than the ordinary futon or inner-spring mattress. Even the more affordable items, such as organic meats and vegetables, are enough more expensive than their conventional counterparts that consumers who have only modest incomes do not buy them. Still, they are not *that* much more costly. A substantial fraction of the public, numbering certainly in the tens of millions, at least, do have enough discretionary income that they can afford to spend more for organic rather than conventionally grown food, install water filters in the home, spend a bit more for “organic” personal hygiene products, and so forth. As a result, some of these products have become true mass-market items; others have not quite achieved that status but are gaining in popularity.

Why Should the Growth of Inverted Quarantine Concern Us?

People acting individualistically, as consumers? If that were all there was to it, the phenomenon would hardly be worth noticing, much less writing about at length. Individualism, as a mode of experiencing and as a mode of action, is at the core of our culture. Consumption is too. Consuming occupies much of our time, attention, enthusiasm—passion, even. It is hardly surprising, then, to see people apply the logic of consumption to situations (such as the one we are considering—having one’s health threatened by toxic chemicals in the environment) that, from a naive point of view, seem to have nothing to do with acts of shopping. So why should the growth of inverted quarantine be of interest to us?

Any behavior that is widespread is likely to be of sociological interest. If only a few people act in a particular way, that is not likely to affect the course of things much, if at all. If, on the other hand, many millions do it, that behavior or activity can acquire real sociological or historical force. Millions living in gated communities, tens of millions living in exurbia, tens of millions drinking bottled water, eating organic food, buying “natural” goods—this is not just an interesting phenomenon; it is a phenomenon that is likely to have *consequences*.

Not that these consequences are intended. Time and again,

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sociologists have shown that actions can have—often do have—*unintended* consequences. People who engage in these kinds of behaviors, move to gated communities, drink only filtered water, and so forth, intend only to take care of themselves and their loved ones. They do not mean to have some kind of larger impact on the world. But their actions could have consequences they did not foresee, did not intend, and do not necessarily want. Indeed, that is what I wish to argue in this book. Environmental inverted quarantine is worth studying because it is likely to have serious consequences, in fact, consequences of historical significance.