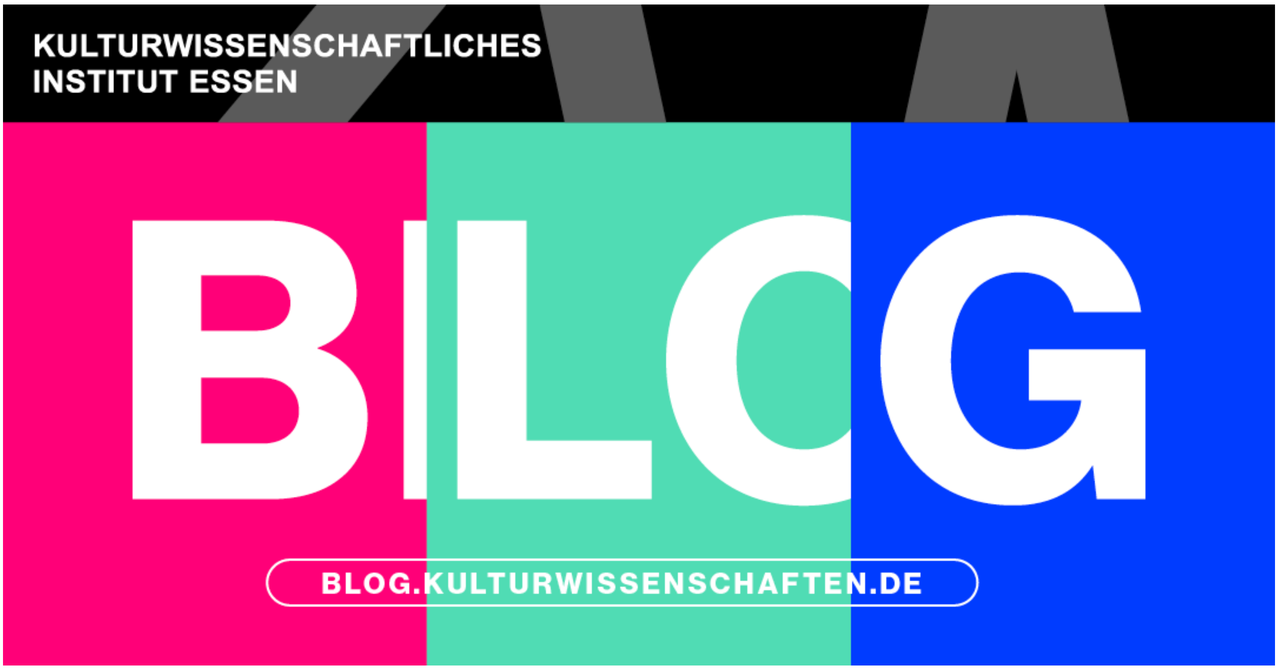

Life is Too Short

Von: Kasey Henricks

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"Life is too short stay Happy." This sentence is the opening line of Revall Burke's Facebook profile. Burke was a 60-year-old, health-conscious ex-Marine who volunteered his free time to run block clubs for kids in his Auburn Gresham neighborhood on the southside of Chicago. He was also Chicago's first city employee to die of COVID-19 complications. In late March 2020, Burke came down with what he thought was a cold. Days later, he had a fever and trouble breathing. Burke shrugged it off, thinking it wasn't a cold but the flu. He nevertheless took the symptoms seriously. Mustering enough strength, Burke drove himself to a nearby hospital. The doctors sedated Burke shortly after arrival and placed him on a ventilator. Twelve hours later, his kidneys shut down. He was put on life support. Burke fought for his life over the next eight days. His six children, fiancé and extended family, and too many friends to count were on around-the-clock prayer duty.

Revall Burke gave the Department of Finance 15 years of service working as a parking enforcement aide. Without mentioning Burke by name, a visibly emotional Mayor Lori Lightfoot delivered the news at a press conference: "It is with a heavy heart that I am here to announce that Chicago has lost one of our own city employees to COVID-19."[1] The mayor was mum about Burke's latest work detail, one that placed him on parking ticket patrol. Weeks earlier when schools began to close, restaurants were shutting down, and economic collapse was on the brink, Mayor Lightfoot announced plans to pause ticketing throughout the city as a small gesture of relief. Besides, many Chicagoans were working remote and following stay-at-home orders anyway. At a March 18 news conference, the mayor announced, "The only ticketing that is going to be happening is if there is a car or other vehicle posing some kind of public safety threat."[2] Normal ticketing would be suspended until at least April 30. Lightfoot went on to explain: "So, for example, an expired meter that is otherwise legally parked and not posing a public safety threat, you should not be getting ticketed."

Threats to "public safety" turned out to be broadly defined. More than 35,000 parking tickets were written at a time when Mayor Lightfoot assured Chicagoans they'd get a break.[3] Half were issued to cars for expired meters around the Central Business District. Outside of the downtown area, tickets were mostly concentrated in majority Black and Latinx neighborhoods – spaces just like those that Revall Burke patrolled and called home. Many alleged violations involved non-urgent causes of concern, like not having a city sticker, a residential parking permit, or up-to-date registration. The Mayor's Office would later walk back Lightfoot's original pledge. But what kind of choice did Chicago's mayor really have? Her position was one of relative autonomy, not absolute authority, over the very city she was elected to govern.

More than a decade earlier, Chicago conceded its public right of way by leasing away its parking meters. On February 13, 2009, a Morgan Stanley-led conglomerate, joined by German investor Allianz Capital and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, assumed jurisdiction over the City's more than 36,000 parking meters. The parking meter deal passed in a landslide 40-to-5 vote among City Council,[4] even though ward representatives were only given an 8-page summary of the some 500-page lease agreement and 72 hours to vet the proposal. Several alders later admitted not knowing what they voted on. The contract allowed City Council to retain the right to set meter rates and hours of operation, designate where meters would be located, and regulate the rules of the road, with some qualification. If any of these actions undermine meter system's value, then the City owes concessionary payments to Morgan Stanley and company.

At what cost did Chicago sell off its parking meters? $1.16 billion dollars for 75 years. Hourly rates for downtown spaces spiked by more than 100% once the contract took effect. In business districts outside of downtown, rates jumped by 300%. Rates in residential areas ballooned by 700%. The contract also includes a non-compete clause. It prohibits any new City-run parking garages or lots within a mile radius of metered parking unless these spaces charge at least three times the hourly rate. With these rate hikes and a market cornered, alongside an intensification in enforcement (i.e., ticketing, towing, and impoundment), the Morgan Stanley-led consortium was able to recoup its original investment in only 10 years after the contract took effect. And since the contract doesn't expire until 2083, the sell-off seals the fate of Chicago's streets for years to come. What all this means is that the city's streetscape will be frozen in time, resembling a 20 century landscape defined in the image of automobility even amid a world of 21 century problems — the ongoing pandemic included.

Buried in the contract is a condition, otherwise known as "true-up adjustments," that requires the City to compensate global capital for every metered space taken out of service. The reason for removal is irrelevant under this arrangement, even though metered spots are routinely taken out of circulation for things like road maintenance, neighborhood block parties, or street repurposing.[5] Why did Morgan Stanley and company insist upon true-up payments as part of the deal? Because they reduce the risk from uncertainties like economic shocks, population transitions, and so on. Supporters of the sell-off looked past these details, insisting the deal outsourced a troubled asset that required many resources without return on investment. In 2016, the City installed 752 new meters to offset true-up payments. Another 1,802 have been added since Mayor Lori Lightfoot took office in 2019. During the 2020 fiscal year, these payments amounted to $6.3 million. While this number is small by budgetary standards, it's worth recalling that parking meters netted $20 million in annual revenues before the sell-off. Now, they're an expenditure for a city that faced a billion-dollar deficit in 2021.

Beyond the commodification of Chicago's infrastructure, where streets are defined more for their exchange than use value, the role of government is reconstituted under the regime of the parking meter deal.[6] Other cities responded to the pandemic by reimagining their streets, from technical standards of urban design to questions of who streets are for and to what ends. They reverted metered spaces to places of medical care, open dining for fledging restaurants, and other uses for social good. City leaders of Chicago selectively followed in these footsteps because they had to balance their choices against not owning the public way. Any decision to disrupt the meter money requires Chicago to make up with the difference. That is, the sell-off defers local governance to returns for global capital while Chicagoans become ever more vulnerable. These vulnerabilities are not just borne by Chicago's car-driving population, city planners, or local government more generally, though. As we've come to witness through the pandemic, like with the tragic case of Revall Burke, these costs have come to be socialized onto the bodies of "essential workers" who keep the meter money moving.

Nurses and doctors got their "claps for care." Others banged pots and pans as a token of thanks to frontline workers. There has been no public celebration to honor the so-called "metermaids" as they continued to parade their ticketing routes like any pre-pandemic day. It's a thankless job that draws workers out from the quarantined confines of home. Against the "we're all in it together" narrative, the pandemic exposes how ticket work is antithetical to social distancing. It demands boots on the streets, welcoming confrontations that almost never end in the "Good day, how are you doing?" variety. Talk to any parking enforcement aide and they have one of these stories, whether it's a time when they were threatened with violence, when they got yelled or spit at, or when a homeless person told them to get a real job. And for what? The job generally pays a poverty wage, lacks social protections like sick leave, and treats employees as replaceable. But few other upwardly mobile prospects are available in an hourglass economy. The very factors that predisposed Revall Burke to labor under these circumstances of necessity are those that make it more difficult to protect ticket writers more generally against COVID, all in a world of parking where capital interests supersede ethico-epidemiological questions of mortality and morality. Under Chicago's meter deal, profit is immune from the pandemic. Life of the very people who make it possible is disposable.

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