

# The Law of the Excluded Middle: Discourse as Casualty of the Post-Truth Extremist Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

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**Abstract**

The unprecedented World Health Organization orchestrated lockdown and public health measures in response to the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic were enacted by virtually every government worldwide. In many countries, but especially the United States, long-standing political animosities congealed into a discourse of dehumanization between liberal establishment adherents and anti-state revolutionaries. Left out from the field were the plural voices fitting neither camp. Mikhail Bakhtin's lens of *Ideologiekritik* offers a diagnosis, and the symbolic destabilizing tool of the carnivalesque provides a discursive tool to soften the political polarization and depoliticized technocracy of the coronavirus pandemic state of exception. The conflagration of the global coronavirus governmental response and the often violent counter-responses warrants examining the democratic dangers of dualistic discourses. Disrupting this explosive polarization requires reintroducing plural discursive spaces which widen the conversation to include liminal and oblique perspectives via spectacle and jest—the carnival—providing a potential nonviolent path forward.

**Keywords**

discourse, polarization, dialogue, Bakhtin, carnivalesque, democracy, state of exception

*Everybody is identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else.*

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

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## I. Introduction

On September 11, 2001, aviation security worldwide changed forever, even as the threat of a terrorist gaining control of an airplane to destroy a metropolitan region quickly receded to previous background rates of nil. The legitimate fears from this one-off incident did not end with the subsided threat. Instead, fears lingered, and fanned statist policies drummed up by the emergency. Unlike a normal emergency, which has an expiration date, the emergency measures taken first in the United States, but also to a large extent soon around the world, reverberated like aftershocks, never quite going away. With ever renewed threats—from Bin-Laden, to Al-Qaeda, to Isis, and new cold wars with Russia and China—the United States found itself in a state of permanent war. What had once been extraordinary measures to combat an extraordinary peril slid into the new normal of the War on Terror. Perpetuated from both sides, the vicious circle of aggrandizement and one-upmanship—each group of actors seeing themselves as rigorously fulfilling the will of god and justice—led to institutionalized traumas from responses to the original event, which left the world less, not more, secure. Long after the threat was officially “neutralized” (and even after a list of new threats were manufactured as existential), the policies put in place—such as the Patriot Act and the Department of Homeland Security in the United States—lived on, as monuments of internalized and institutionalized self-terrorization. The state of exception not only replaced political discussion with technocratic decisionism immune to the changing power of critique, but also instantiated permanent measures extending long beyond the original justifications.

The conceit that permanent institutionalization and socialization of extraordinary measures would not repeat again in a different context has been abolished by the World Health Organization (WHO) coordinated global response to the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 (also known as COVID-19, or simply the coronavirus). As never before, humans in almost every country obeyed virtually identical lockstep government quarantine orders, withdrawing to their homes for months, and refraining from public or economic activity. Striking was how even in countries where the virus had not yet seriously hit and social distancing and economic shutdowns would cripple subsistence economies (such as Nigeria),<sup>1</sup> the WHO model was just as evenly applied. Soon thereafter, big tech and governments worldwide worked to roll-out “contact tracing,” yoking Bluetooth and other already deployed phone tracking technologies to map out every movement of denizens, providing a geotracking alarm system in case someone in immediate geo-colocation tested positive with the coronavirus so those with whom they had previously been in contact could be notified of the risk in order to prevent further spreading. Technology companies also promised a future of virtual everything, from online-only school systems and work to livestreamed concerts and festivals. While forms of contact tracing are routinely used in epidemiology, against the background of a loss of trust in government and the lacking transparency of these smartphone-based tracking apps (and riding on tracking hardware and software that is useful as it is liable to abrogate privacy rights), legitimate suspicions arise in the current execution of this novel form of above-board network tracking.

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1. OluTimehin Adegbeye, “Why Social Distancing Won’t Work for Us,” *The Correspondent*, March 27, 2020, <https://thecorrespondent.com/378/why-social-distancing-wont-work-for-us/35025532542-c7457646>

Concurrent to the precision response to the coronavirus by governments has also been a sometimes militant and often conspiracy-theory espousing countermovement.<sup>2</sup> This countermovement has been associated with a motley of contemporary libertarian beliefs, inspired by the subaltern internet propagandists that emerged from the Tea Party in the United States (originally orchestrated by the Koch brothers before taking on a life of its own) and the long-standing libertarian and fossil fuel industry disinformation campaigns (originating in the United States and spreading to Europe and beyond), which laid the soil for the so-called Dark Web and QAnon oracles of anti-authority (and often thinly veiled white supremacist) conspiracy theories.<sup>3</sup> In the process, the adversarial and combative stance this countermovement took (including a capricious but in-your-face anti-mask movement alleging that requiring the wearing of a mask during the pandemic violated personal liberty) ended up rending democratic discourse in two. The cry from both camps—public health obeying and defying—was: “Either you are with us, or you’re against us,” echoing George W. Bush’s proclamation during the first years of the War on Terror. Whether a different, less violent mode of accessing critique during this pandemic would have been better absorbed and integrated into institutionalized and broadcast media responses is speculatively counterfactual. What happened, is that broadcast media, establishment institutions, and their court, soundly closed ranks against the often violent and nihilistic naysayers; and in the process, willy-nilly closed down opportunities for critical democratic discourse.

I argue here that in contemporary circumstances, the distinction between making democratic decisions respecting pluralist views and legitimate scientific disagreements versus antagonistic and often dehumanizing side-taking has imploded into the latter, especially but not only in the American context, fueled by decentralized information transfer and access. No longer is the nexus of power clear nor stable, despite the continuance in structure if not in operation or spirit of traditional institutions such as governments, militaries, establishment broadcast media and universities. Partially, this lack of monopoly on power is due to the mounting indignation against the various contradictions of care—where we are told to take care of not infecting our neighbor, but not to reduce our consumption to make sure all humans have enough to eat, or to ensure future generations inherit a livable planet. A significant portion of the dissent stems from what is observed as a lopsided response against this biological threat compared to the anemic

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2. In the Michigan State Capitol building for example, armed militias with semi-automatic firearms entered and occupied the Capitol. The State of Michigan allows guns inside the Capitol building, but prohibits protest signs inside. Louis Casiano, “Michigan Protesters Storm State Capitol in Fight over Coronavirus Rules: ‘Men with Rifles Yelling at Us,’” Article, Fox News (Fox News, April 30, 2020), <https://www.foxnews.com/us/michigan-lansing-coronavirus-protest-capitol-guns-rifles>
  3. Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016); Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America*, Reprint edition (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2018); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, Reprint edition (Bloomsbury Press, 2011); David Michaels, *Triumph of Doubt*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

global response (no trillions invested or economies closed down) to manmade totally avoidable problems. As one critic has remarked: “Those who are on board with this—with the lockdown, the social distancing, the face masks—sanctimoniously heckle those who conscientiously object (‘Granny killer!’) while turning a blind eye to the suicides, poverty, and social dissolution they are tacitly supporting.”<sup>4</sup> Contradictions and asymmetries of care certainly can be taken advantage of by scofflaws. Yet the fact that these other public health crises are brushed-aside is not fake news; this contradiction constitutes a glaring deficiency in democracies we have ignored for far too long.

The coronavirus pandemic provides rare insight into how a state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*) reveals the actual degree of democratic discourse. The rapid polarization of the pandemic response into holy or heresy—with little available discursive space in between—revealed the already fracturing body politic in the post-broadcast age. One task for the traditional “estates” of government has been securing access to (and suppression of) information to ensure a standardized common background, prerequisite for maintaining a coherent narrative or “lifeworld” (in the words first of Husserl and then Habermas). If it is true that this responsibility held for the age of reason, it has become impossible, impractical, and devalued in the age of the spectacle. Social media has stripped away the monopoly of broadcast media, which could be interpreted positively as a democratization of knowledge. As the power of broadcast media and governments to control narratives has eroded, human rights violations have become more noticeable, state-sanctioned violence and suppression in dictatorships has become less legitimate. Yet, with this lack of a shared and sanctioned (national) imaginary, public opinion has fragmented into a doubling-down on us-against-them narratives, leading to disincentives for discourse across and within cancel-culture prone poles. (Cancel culture itself is the fragmentation of political correctness: the standards for being politically correct are now dual and oppositional.)

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, focusing on the United States, even the government itself is fractured between downplaying the effects of the coronavirus and taking it seriously. The US government in 2020 played both coronavirus denier and public health’s front guard. In the deterioration of democratic discourse based on a shared lifeworld into a struggle between two main factions for control over which narrative dominates—one still connected to science and the other untethered from it—the goal has shifted from tolerance or compromise to a zeitgeist of domination and annihilation of enemy beliefs. While it would be easy to cast this as a uniquely American problem, already right-wing anti-science anti-establishment authoritarian parties and demonstrations in Europe and in other democracies signal how contagious this type of politics can be.

Through the lens of critical political theorists focusing on the delicateness of democracy, such as the Russian philosopher Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s dialogism and *heteroglossia*, I argue that the corona pandemic and its various ricocheting responses spell the end of the current phase of rational pluralistic discourse and democracy. The monological

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4. Patrick Fagan, “The Lockdown Lobotomy,” *The Critic Magazine*, August 11, 2020, <https://thecritic.co.uk/the-lockdown-lobotomy/>

closure of dominant discourse and its pluralistic balance of subaltern discourses has metastasized into a bipolar antagonistic discourse system resistant to plural opinions or critique. Analyzing the current crisis through Bakhtinian *Ideologiekritik*, I claim that creative modes of disrupting this explosive antipodal enmity requires occupying the discursive plural through the method of carnivalesque, which entails a burlesquing of positions through their inversion and deflation of seriousness; in short, productive political subversion and recuperation through humor and play.

## II. The Official Program's Successes and Failures

Talk of the “new normal” and a “permanent 1.5 meter society” pervade headlines and whispers in organizational meetings of businesses and public institutions. But the discrepancies between statistics and life grows ever wider in the manufacture of competitive facts. In the gap between the control system of reason and the recalcitrant world, Michel Serres has written, “If our rational could wed the real, the real our rational, our reasoned undertakings would leave no residue; so if garbage proliferates in the gap between them, it’s because that gap produces pollution. . . . Since the filth is growing, the breach between the two worlds must be getting worse.”<sup>5</sup> More tests for the coronavirus mean finding more positive cases, so the President of the United States sought to decelerate and even deter testing, conniving even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to adopt this ignorance-is-bliss stance.<sup>6</sup> The face-saving game of appearances, downplaying actual harms and risks through manipulating testing numbers and death statistics, during this pandemic has become more important than the actual epidemiological knowledge gained from as sincere as possible estimations of the current crisis’s risks. This logic is summed up in the US President’s statement that “If we stop testing right now, we’d have very few cases, actually.”<sup>7</sup> By equating more testing to more cases, the entire optics of the epidemic collapses into a competitive numbers game subject to fudging, rather than attempting to assess reality. The reverse-causation in such logics assumes that if one can deflect and delay the moment of reckoning long enough, the illusion of maintaining everything under control can persist, even if such an illusion requires considerable energy and ultimately violence.

This is not the first time during the pandemic, however, that face-saving behavior has actually made things worse. Indeed, the pandemic spread globally in the first place because China downplayed the actual extent and danger of the coronavirus to the WHO,

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5. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract, Studies in Literature and Science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 24–25.

6. Jamie Gumbrecht, Maggie Fox, and Michael Nedelman, “Updated CDC Guidelines Now Say People Exposed to Coronavirus May Not Need to Be Tested - CNN,” *CNN*, August 26, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/26/health/cdc-guidelines-coronavirus-testing/>

7. Sonam Sheth, “Trump Says That ‘if We Stop Testing Right Now, We’d Have Very Few Cases’ of the Coronavirus,” *Business Insider*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/trump-says-that-if-we-stop-testing-right-now-wed-have-very-few-cases-of-the-coronavirus/ar-BB15wnao>

which failed to quickly enough sound the alarm of the actual threat.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the effectiveness of such an early warning alert would have been predicated on other nations shutting down air travel from China and other countries—which was resisted, ironically, as in previous pandemics,<sup>9</sup> almost universally for fear it would unnecessarily harm national economies.<sup>10</sup> Little did our leaders recognize that shutting down airports would have saved tremendous amounts of money, as their failure to restrict travel meant shutting down the economy and providing the first global experiment (however failed) in doling out Universal Basic Income (UBI). As of course most of the trillions of dollars and euros in stimulus went to bolstering unsustainable industries (like airlines that had spent all of their profits not on workers or rainy day funds, but on artificially pumping up their stock prices through stock buy-backs at obscene prices),<sup>11</sup> state funds were but a temporary solution to the untold millions out of work, working less, or closing down their small businesses as a result of a three to six month closure of all businesses deemed non-essential in the first wave alone. By defying biological risks and keeping borders open far longer than they should have out of elite's selfish and economic interests, Europe and other countries ended up harming and debilitating the livelihoods of those worst off, while in the end helping those best off. Stimulus indeed.

Framing border closure as harmful for the economy was usually pushed by those financially well-off willing to gamble with the health of a country for additional economic gain. Such an outcome from disasters has become standardized as a practice of accruing more wealth to fewer actors, reproducing the reverse-Robin Hood model of Western colonialism.<sup>12</sup> While the stock market rose like a Phoenix after the middle of March 2020's historic losses, capital has fared much better than actual human beings. During the pandemic-induced recession, in the United States alone, 467 billionaires increased their wealth by \$730,000,000,000 while unprecedented levels of unemployment, lost jobs, and

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8. As *Politico* wrote: “Without China’s deceit and WHO’s solicitude for Beijing, the outbreak might have been more limited, and the world at the very least would have had more time to react to the virus. China committed unforgivable sins of commission, affirmatively lying about the outbreak and punishing doctors and disappearing journalists who told the truth, whereas the WHO committed sins of omission—it lacked independence and courage at a moment of great consequence. In effect, China and the WHO worked together to expose the rest of the world to the virus, at the same time they downplayed its dangers.” Rich Lowry, “Blaming the WHO and China Is Not Scapegoating,” *Politico*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/04/08/who-china-trump-coronavirus-176242>

9. Jennifer Nuzzo and Gigi Kwik Gronvall, “Global Health Security: Closing the Gaps in Responding to Infectious Disease Emergencies,” *Global Health Governance* 4(2) (2011), 1–15.

10. Martin de Jong, “Eyes Wide Shut: Europe’s State of Denial in Handling the Coronavirus,” *Dynamics of Inclusive Prosperity*, Erasmus University Rotterdam, March 7, 2020, <https://www.eur.nl/en/news/eyes-wide-shut-europes-state-denial-handling-coronavirus>

11. Ellen Proper, Diederik Baazil, and Tara Patel, “Air France-KLM’s \$3.8 Billion Dutch Aid Comes With Strings,” *Bloomberg.Com*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-26/air-france-klm-to-get-3-8-billion-in-aid-from-the-netherlands>

12. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 1st edition (Picador, 2008).

closed small businesses drove tens of millions to the brink of despair. Almost 10 percent of Americans have signed up for unemployment benefits resulting from coronavirus response lay-offs.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere in the world, similar trends are commonplace; the economic and health consequences of the response to the corona epidemic are intimately intertwined. At the beginning of the pandemic, hoarders of everything from hand disinfectant and N95 facemasks to toilet paper sought to make a windfall off the backs of a public health tragedy, with mega distributors like Amazon complicit in the action until public shaming forced them to adopt less overtly gouging measures.<sup>14</sup> While state governments were portrayed around the world as enacting boilerplate policies in lockstep worldwide with almost military precision, the actual responses often looked more like capitalist speculation on a game of chicken—which country would be able to delay taking action long enough to make more money in the immediate short term?

In recent decades, public health policy has become hamstrung by economic primacy and face-saving in making decisions, subordinating other considerations to brand-building and short-term payoffs. Thus, if it had turned out that shutting down air travel did not provide additional saved lives but only economic woes, the responsible politicians would be punished. This sword of Damocles hanging over every politician's head further discouraged early-adopter leadership to protect their country from the pandemic, delaying the closures until it was too late.

Yet, as data regarding the consequences of governmental responses to the coronavirus pandemic becomes available, we observe that reduced economic activity has an unintended silver-lining on lives saved. In China alone, reduced economic activity led to significantly lowered air pollution saving the lives of over 4,000 children under the age of five, and 73,000 elderly over the age of 70.<sup>15</sup> While some politicians discuss “building back better” to maintain these windfall public health benefits amidst the pandemic's tragedies, it is widely acknowledged that climate change has taken a backseat to corona concerns.

This background set the human tragedy of the virus and the heroic register of the public health response. The political economy of the pandemic and the public health and mortality aspects existed in parallel planes, with little cross-reference. Those countries with already a high trust in government, like Sweden, were the most successful in balancing economic shutdowns and public health achievements. Those countries with low trust in government, like the United States, have fared far worse—not only in terms of the number of positive COVID-19 tests or deaths per capita from the virus, but also in terms of civil unrest and open disobedience against public health orders. The corona pandemic reveals

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13. Patricia Cohen, “Rise in Unemployment Claims Signals an Economic Reversal,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2020, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/business/economy/unemployment-economy-coronavirus.html>

14. Adam Garber, “Coronavirus Worry Triggers Most Surgical Mask, Sanitizer Prices to Spike at Least 50% on Amazon,” *US Public Interest Research Group*, March 11, 2020, <https://uspirg.org/news/usp/coronavirus-worry-triggers-most-surgical-mask-sanitizer-prices-spike-least-50-amazon>

15. Marshall Burke, “COVID-19 Reduces Economic Activity, Which Reduces Pollution, Which Saves Lives,” *G-FEED (Global Food, Environment and Economic Dynamics)* (blog), March 8, 2020, <http://www.g-feed.com/2020/03/covid-19-reduces-economic-activity.html>

a well-known truism among public health practitioners: that the severity of public health measures is always in evolution together with public perceptions and the status quo. Overstep the boundary of what is considered reasonable, and the potential for undermining or rebellious actions could sink a given public health campaign, even lowering the legitimacy for other public health measures in a sort of spillover effect. If the coronavirus is just a preview of future emerging infectious diseases (EIDs), as climate change promises to deliver, then figuring out how to accurately balance the exigencies of preexisting socially wrought illnesses, economic stability, and taking effective measures against EIDs has much to learn from the one-size-fits-all WHO global guidelines.

The dynamics that lead to the degeneration of democracies into polarized antagonistic camps can be exacerbated by establishment policies shutting out communication with critics, even friendly ones. This is what Bakhtin calls the domination of the “authoritarian word” (*avtoritarnoe slovo*), when dialog gives way to diktat.<sup>16</sup> Rather than cohesive if uncomfortable, a bifurcated lifeworld closes off against claims it sees as existentially threatening. Part of the dichotomization of the corona pandemic response between believers in an official version of public health and the lumping of friendly critics, disbelievers, and hostile deniers into the enemy camp (or “deplorables,” to use Hillary Clinton’s nomenclature), results from the relative global denial of preexisting harms much worse in terms of mortality rates than the coronavirus. The trillions of dollars that suddenly became freed up for bailing out companies and temporarily supporting regular people thrown out of work by disrupted economies, ring hollow against the claims of naysayers that there are no funds to invest in a Green Deal, cure malaria, fight air pollution (which made corona cases more deadly and more likely to be transmitted),<sup>17</sup> or reduce the plethora of anthropogenic diseases like obesity. If 10,000 children may die per month due to the coronavirus *response* of closing various economic sectors, which then threaten food security for hundreds of millions to billions of people worldwide (according to the United Nations),<sup>18</sup> then the question “is it worth it?” must be front and present in our decision-making.

These causes of death, however, unlike the coronavirus, are those that in theory can be avoided by the entitled (economic, political, educational, or otherwise). Death by tobacco or alcoholism or junk food is entirely avoidable by regulating these industries, chemical exposures skew heavily toward black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and low-socioeconomic status individuals and households, and most chronic diseases environmentally-related are avoided by the rich and powerful by hop-scotching from

16. *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984), x.

17. Leonardo Setti et al., “SARS-Cov-2 RNA Found on Particulate Matter of Bergamo in Northern Italy: First Preliminary Evidence,” preprint (Infectious Diseases (except HIV/AIDS), April 18, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.15.20065995>; Antonio Frontera et al., “Regional Air Pollution Persistence Links to COVID-19 Infection Zoning,” *The Journal of Infection* 81(2) (2020), 318–56, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinf.2020.03.045>

18. Associated Press, “UN Report States COVID-19 Linked Hunger Is Leading to the Deaths of 10,000 Children a Month,” *Firstpost*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/health/un-report-states-covid-19-linked-hunger-is-leading-to-the-deaths-of-10000-children-a-month-8648021.html>

fortress enclave to enclave globally (without allegiance to any particular one).<sup>19</sup> Unique about this contagious rather than chronic or environmental disease is that biological entities such as viruses do not discriminate against rich or poor, the mighty or the meek. Indeed, it is the jet setting global travelers and elite businessmen—those who have grown accustomed to a two-tiered system of rules they need not follow—who may simultaneously be the most at risk and the main super-spreaders.

Frequent traveling to myriad countries, with varying rates of coronavirus infection, to attend political or business meetings, visit properties, or to “escape from it all” in the tropics, expose travelers to higher risks of contracting the virus (often with insufficient time for self-isolation) as well as risks exposing others to the infection. Indicative is that heads of state, such as Boris Johnson, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Emmanuel Macron all contracted the coronavirus, and Trump in turn infected others in the Rose Garden super-spreader event. Rather than anomalous, these cases are symptomatic of elites’ heightened risk of infection and the risk they constitute to others. Another example is the Westport, Connecticut, elite house party super-spreader event on March 5, 2020, known as “party zero,” which brought corona virulently to the Eastern seaboard of the United States.<sup>20</sup> Long understood by epidemiologists, for most infectious diseases, Pareto principles apply: 80 per cent of transmissions are caused by 20 per cent of the carriers, or fewer (in this case possibly 5 per cent of the population caused 95 per cent of the spread).<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely because this virus has affected those most shielded by capital’s personal commodity bubbles<sup>22</sup> that the global institutional response has been so forceful, swift, and unforgiving. The world must remain safe for elite lifestyles, allowing for as long as possible the sustenance of their unsustainable actions—even if that means destroying people’s mental health, physical health, subsistence, and the real economy in order to do so.

As mentioned above, one of the bigger threats usually overlooked is that 10,000 children die from hunger and malnutrition worldwide every day.<sup>23</sup> On no single day so far in the corona pandemic have 10,000 people died, let alone children with their future ahead

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19. Michel Serres, *Malfesance: Appropriation Through Pollution?*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon, 1 edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity, 2018).

20. Kristin Hussey and Elizabeth Williamson, “Party Zero: How a Soirée in Connecticut Became a Coronavirus ‘Super Spreader,’” *New York Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/coronavirus-westport-connecticut-party-zero.html>; Michael Wines and Amy Harmon, “What Happens When a Superspreader Event Keeps Spreading,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/us/biogen-conference-covid-spread.html>

21. Neel V. Patel, “What’s a Coronavirus Superspreader?,” *MIT Technology Review*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/06/15/1003576/whats-a-coronavirus-superspreader/>

22. Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

23. African Child Policy Forum, “For Lack of Will: Child Hunger in Africa” (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), 2019).

of them (this is a consideration for most ethicists—the question of not just how many lives but how many potential quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) are at stake). Even worse, food deprivation is getting worse under corona restrictions. Malnutrition (“wasting”) rates during 2020 increased 6.5 million children more than the 47 million malnourished children in 2019 (primarily in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East).<sup>24</sup> In their report “The Hunger Virus,” Oxfam estimates that if the world food shortages in parts of Africa, South America, Asia, and the Middle East continue as a result of the coronavirus measures, by 2021 up to 12,000 children worldwide may die from hunger *per day*.<sup>25</sup> In terms of QALYs, this is much, much worse than the life costs of the coronavirus. The head of the World Food Program has warned that the world faces “multiple famines of biblical proportions” following the lockdowns and economic recessions stemming from the global WHO-based one-size-fits-all corona directives.<sup>26</sup> For many of the most structurally economically disadvantaged counties, restrictions on movement and working day laborers, especially in places where the death toll from the coronavirus is the least of locals’ mortal worries, seems almost cruel.

The untold social dangers of the social isolation of quarantine have also led many Westerners to self-medicate this anxiety via consumption and has also triggered in some cases increased self- and other-harm. Health threats include increased obesity (the so-called quarantine-15 pounds),<sup>27</sup> taking up old addictions like tobacco and alcohol,<sup>28</sup> and upticks in depression,<sup>29</sup> suicide,<sup>30</sup> and domestic violence.<sup>31</sup> These increased injuries and

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24. Associated Press, “UN Report States COVID-19 Linked Hunger Is Leading to the Deaths of 10,000 Children a Month.”
  25. Oxfam International, “The Hunger Virus: How COVID-19 Is Fuelling Hunger in a Hungry World,” July 9, 2020, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/hunger-virus-how-covid-19-fuelling-hunger-hungry-world>
  26. BBC News, “World Risks ‘biblical’ Famines Due to Pandemic—UN,” *BBC News*, April 21, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52373888>
  27. Rebecca L. Pearl, “Weight Stigma and the ‘Quarantine-15,’” *Obesity* 28(7) (2020), 1180–81, <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22850>
  28. Yan Sun et al., “Brief Report: Increased Addictive Internet and Substance Use Behavior During the COVID-19 Pandemic in China,” *The American Journal on Addictions* 29(4) (July 2020), 268–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajad.13066>; Jade Bremner, “U.S. Alcohol Sales Increase 55 Percent in One Week Amid Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Newsweek*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-alcohol-sales-increase-55-percent-one-week-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-1495510>
  29. Kevin M. Fitzpatrick, Casey Harris, and Grant Drawve, “Living in the Midst of Fear: Depressive Symptomatology among US Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Depression and Anxiety*, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.23080>; Yeen Huang and Ning Zhao, “Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Depressive Symptoms and Sleep Quality during COVID-19 Outbreak in China: A Web-Based Cross-Sectional Survey,” *Psychiatry Research* 288 (June 1, 2020), 112954, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112954>
  30. Mark A. Reger, Ian H. Stanley, and Thomas E. Joiner, “Suicide Mortality and Coronavirus Disease 2019—A Perfect Storm?,” *JAMA Psychiatry*, April 10, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.1060>
  31. Melissa Godin, “How Coronavirus Is Affecting Victims of Domestic Violence,” *Time Magazine*, March 18, 2020, <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

traumas have led to more fearful people, which has led to a record sales in firearms in the United States.<sup>32</sup> The increased obesity rates caused by the lockdown and the associated emotional eating may lead to other health harms,<sup>33</sup> as well as making any corona vaccine less effective (as vaccines are less effective for obese people).<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the compartmentalization of harms from the pandemic itself seems to overlook or mask the larger constellation of harms and health factors which have been disrupted by the capture of public health and media attention by the corona pandemic. Despite record environmental harms (e.g., unprecedented fires in California, 35 per cent of Bangladesh flooding, class 5 hurricanes) during the summer of 2020, even environmentalists write that “Climate change policy cannot be the first priority of the EU for the immediate future,”<sup>35</sup> emphasizing how the immediate panic precipitated by the response to the coronavirus has blotted out other pressing social issues that cannot wait but must.

### III. Taking Sides and the Loss of Critique

It is not surprising, in this climate of fear for personal safety and the threat of the potentially lethal other, that democratic discourse has become polarized, especially in a state of exception that disallows casual team interactions between those with different ideologies (say, through sports, office conversation, or other modes of physical free association). The consequences at this juncture may be dire if this impasse fails to dissipate and provide for genuine communicative action even among those who vehemently disagree with each other. We’re all not only bowling alone, in Putnam’s iconic phrase, but not even bowling anymore. And with psychographic online advertising creating ideological halls of mirrors, and online groupthink magnifiers like reddit, 4chan, and 8chan, it is no surprise that identification with abstract principles has tribalized. Essentializing the complexities of the progressive and conservative mix of stances most people hold into the reductionism of ideological camps creates a vicious circle difficult to crawl out of. If Freud’s work christened the rise of bottomless interiority, AI’s behavioralism signals its

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32. Kate Thayer, “Coronavirus Pandemic Creates Suicide Risk. ‘This Could Last Years,’” *MSN*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/coronavirus-pandemic-creates-suicide-risk-this-could-last-years/ar-BB135Zme>

33. Y. D. Peng et al., “[Clinical characteristics and outcomes of 112 cardiovascular disease patients infected by 2019-nCoV],” *Zhonghua Xin Xue Guan Bing Za Zhi* 48, no. 0 (March 2, 2020): E004, <https://doi.org/10.3760/cma.j.cn112148-20200220-00105>; Anthony L. Komaroff, “The Microbiome and Risk for Obesity and Diabetes,” *JAMA* 317(4) (January 24, 2017), 355, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2016.20099>; Jeanne Van Cleave, Steven L. Gortmaker, and James M. Perrin, “Dynamics of Obesity and Chronic Health Conditions Among Children and Youth,” *JAMA* 303(7) (February 17, 2010), 623–30, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.104>

34. Scott D. Neidich et al., “Increased Risk of Influenza among Vaccinated Adults Who Are Obese,” *International Journal of Obesity* (2005) 41(9) (September 2017): 1324–30, <https://doi.org/10.1038/ijo.2017.131>

35. Milan Elkerbout et al., “The European Green Deal after Corona - Implications for EU Climate Policy,” *CEPS Papers*, CEPS Papers (Centre for European Policy Studies, March 2020), <https://ideas.repec.org/p/eps/cepswp/26869.html>

end. Depth, complexity, nuance, changing one's mind, have become exceedingly difficult in an era of indelible internet records and clickbait headlines. These subtleties also show up to surveillance capitalism as temporary anomalies rather than ontological traces of life. Ideological aggrandizement has degenerated into epistemic hubris, for fear that other contending ideologies overpower unless one stays on message loud and clear (however wrong or half-heartedly).

Rather than falling down the rabbit's hole of whether China influenced the WHO to initially downplay the seriousness of the coronavirus to save face,<sup>36</sup> or if the economic and mental health impacts of the response has caused more deaths (and future deaths) than the virus itself,<sup>37</sup> I argue it is more informative pragmatically to examine the dialectics within science, between science and politics, and in political liberalism. The (armed) denialist threats to establishment decision-making in the state of emergency fundamentally aims to depose the authority of the state as a unified actor, fracture possible futures, and de-monopolize legitimate violence. Instead of counter- or alter-narratives, the crucible of the coronavirus has launched us into a new phase of post-institutional politics, and post-denialist science, where both social subsystems' hands are forced.

By "post-denialist" science, I mean an era when in circling the scientific wagons against the onslaught of fake news, alternative facts, hoaxers, and other denialists, science becomes monolithic and loses its agonistic disagreements that advance knowledge. Both prevailing scientific and political frames are being actively reconfigured, and representatives of these orders wishing to hold onto previously stable dominance through deceitful or disingenuous countermeasures are undermining the reserves of trust and goodwill in science and politics as much as the denialists and violent extremists refusing to follow orders. In the middle of this, reasonable disagreement with establishment politics or science has lost its breathing room, as all dissent is cast as denialism in this state of exception. Given the lack of concentrated political power and the high degree of flaunting medical and public health advice and rules, however, this state of exception cannot be achieved through force and state violence. Instead, new perspectives and tactics are necessary. Claiming that we are living in a society of spectacle rather than reason (long anticipated by Guy Debord and the Situationists, McLuhan, and Baudrillard, among others), I argue that not only is the "information deficit model" of science insufficient, but it misses the point of denialists by foreclosing public debate on postnormal issues in science and politics. Instead of becoming more transparent and discursive, faced with an adversary—denialism—the scientific establishment is excluding dissenting voices asking otherwise reasonable questions from within its ranks.

While the age of top-down decrees is over—due in part to the now above board subaltern organizing and transparency made possible by the internet and social media—established broadcast media and institutions either do not realize it, or are understandably resistant to

36. Lowry, "Blaming the WHO and China Is Not Scapegoating."

37. Associated Press, "UN Report States COVID-19 Linked Hunger Is Leading to the Deaths of 10,000 Children a Month," *Firstpost*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/health/un-report-states-covid-19-linked-hunger-is-leading-to-the-deaths-of-10000-children-a-month-8648021.html>

this devolution and decentralization of power. Certainly, the cross-over era to whatever comes next is a fraught period of instability before a new stable equilibria is achieved. Ilya Prigogine and others suggest that natural systems are far from thermodynamic equilibrium initially, and fluctuate constantly in and out of equilibrium; when disturbed past a certain threshold they may not return to equilibrium.<sup>38</sup> Disrupted systems can fall out of their previous groovings, and from this liminal chaotic state find new increasingly complex and stable patterns. Applied socially, if the veneer of civilization really is as thin as many conservative theorists have warned, we have reason to be worried. Non-optional, however, is going back to normal. According to systems theory, a punctuated equilibrium in a dynamic means that resiliency has been overshot, and that the new default resting place for the system is somewhere else. The old resting place of power dynamics no longer obtains, no matter how much energy is expended trying to reestablish it. So, I suggest that we embrace the chaos that we have created since the industrial revolution, the Second World War, and the end of the Cold War—mark points of the Anthropocene—and do the best we can with it, including finding better ways of communicating science and political issues non-paternalistically.

While it would be easy to blame the denigration of expertise and the rise of evidence-proof shifting opinion and alter-authorities on postmodernism, the current phenomenon has multiple strands and sources. Part of the vulnerability of science is that it remains future oriented. At any given point, much of what is considered correct will be further refined or disproved. Sociological notions of knowledge, like that of the philosophical pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce or John Dewey, see knowledge as a collective intertemporal activity. The collective temporal project of science in many ways feeds into and overlaps with the collective project of democracy: no individual or organization monopolizes the truth, and through working together we point out each other's blind spots.<sup>39</sup> But both science and democracy are vulnerable to universalist *coup d'états*, posturing all-encompassing orders. In the culture wars of the 21st century a contentious battle among memetic tribes unfolds over social media and also in real life, according to a domination rather than partnership model of progress.<sup>40</sup>

As a way of making sense of and dealing with meaning-making in the 21st century, the Russian philosopher and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin offers some clues. Bakhtin stressed that subaltern logics provide exits from the monological closure of official dominant discourse.<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin in all of his work warns of the epistemic loss and error of cognitive closure in “official” modes of speech, which he sees as overly “serious” and “ecclesiastical.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, for Bakhtin, officialdom is a bankrupt road, because

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38. G. Nicolis and I. Prigogine, *Self-Organization in Nonequilibrium Systems: From Dissipative Structures to Order through Fluctuations* (New York: Wiley, 1977).

39. Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

40. Peter N. Limberg and Conor Barnes, “The Memetic Tribes of Culture War 2.0,” Medium, August 21, 2020, <https://medium.com/s/world-wide-wtf/memetic-tribes-and-culture-war-2-0-14705c43f6bb>

41. M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

42. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.

closed cultural frames prevent the natural progression and dialectical exchange that happens culturally. Linguistic and cultural production always is dialogic according to Bakhtin, whether recognized or denied as such. While traditionally, it is the plurality of subaltern discourses that provides the counterweight to monological dominant discourse, corona times have made a no-man's land out of critique and discourse across the dichotomies of state/anti-state.

Reflexivity about one's own ideology is the process of *Idiologiekritik*, which recognizes how society sculpts worldviews according to various pre-given channels. As much a normative as a descriptive critique, *Idiologiekritik* indicates how canalized thinking falls into blind spots. If linguistic and cultural production is nonoptionally dialogic, and every discourse (dominant and otherwise) is composed of a *heteroglossia*—an incessant borrowing of discourses from other realms—then the linguistic commons supplies discourses with their development, rather than these updates and evolutions occurring in a vacuum or preplanned. Without this linguistic and conceptual circulation, it becomes all too easy for discourses to become ingrown, excluding the middle mixing grounds of cultural production Bakhtin finds crucial.

In the current pandemic, the bipolar discursive sphere splitting discourses into two mutually antagonistic but internally allowable ones, sucks the oxygen out of the generative dialects of interstitial discourses. While the state establishment discourse has its loyal followers, surprisingly in this discursive civil war, the anti-state pole has amassed an *omnium gatherum* of loosely allied perspectives (from right wing anti-government militants to left-wing spiritual seekers, conspiracy theorists, racists, and more), further fragmenting discourse and creating fewer opportunities for genuine dialogic interaction. The corona state of emergency has taken the previous teeming factions and united them in two more-or-less cohesive antipodes.

A discursive arms race has been waged between the establishment and anti-establishment perspective on the coronavirus. While any permanent or existential rip in the fabric of the body politic was previously off the table, the corona state of emergency made visible fissures, which became exacerbated to the point of irreconcilability. Both those unwaveringly accepting the latest public health official decrees, and those equating those rules to a mortal threat, view the other side as fundamentally undebatable, adopting a warlike no-concessions strategy of ultimate enmity. Each side—never really a unified “side” to begin with—views the other as dangerous: biologically, coercively, violently. While their criteria for threats differ, the mutual fear leads to equivalently vitriolic lashing out and desires to contain rather than explain the actions of those with opposing views. This shift from differing to opposing views signals the decay of public discourse, and the civic agreement to nonviolently work out disagreements.

While it would be convenient to see this enmity as one-sided, as the most violent and armed corona deniers certainly receive the most visibility in mainstream media, many of those who disagree with the health establishment party line get kicked out of decent society and pushed down a slippery slope, even if they share little with the other antipode besides some skepticism or critique. A product of call-out culture, those perceived as transgressors of the accepted ideology in either camp have been met with dehumanization and ostracization unless they capitulate completely to the group's full set of beliefs. Such ideological distancing techniques often exacerbate uncertainties and doubts, radicalizing

rather than reconciling the opposition.<sup>43</sup> When dehumanization starts between groups as a result of exaggerating the other's beliefs rather than engaging with those supposed to hold these beliefs on a personal level, manipulating this indignation becomes too easy.

The universalist mythos of liberalism, which states that we will all ascribe one day to a shared ethos and cosmology which would lead to agreement in decision-making based on rational principles (Francis Fukuyama's onetime thesis), has its Janus face of utter domination.<sup>44</sup> Enforced compliance to a single interpretation—a closed hermeneutic circle—is the asymptote of dictators. Due to the plurality of human perception,<sup>45</sup> this can luckily never be accomplished. Yet, we find ourselves in the curious situation where the dominant human structures on earth are part of a liberal global order—even in non-democratic countries, markets still require gesturing at a consensus on core liberal issues even if no country actually complies—while the plural perspectives, especially markedly anti-liberal positions, proliferate.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos suggests that rather than the liberal notion of Enlightenment universalism, that *negative universalism*—“the idea of the impossibility of cultural completeness”—is more apt.<sup>46</sup> The idea that we could ever arrive at an end of history—let alone that there would be a winning ideology—shows the will to power of that ideology, but does little to establish the case that time stops once we reach a pre-scribed finish line. When plural discourses collapse into vying enemy sides constantly upping the stakes through antagonism and winner-take-all decrees, the universalist aspirations of both the current predominating establishment and anti-establishment ideologies belie their contrastive claims. Differing views are solidifying into opposing faiths, increasingly less tolerant to dissent.

Anti-statists seem to be provoking institutions willingly to commit violence to force compliance with public health measures. Such active rejection of state-sponsored public health measures is generally justified by claims to uphold the sanctity of personal liberties contravened by the state during the corona state of exception. These demonstrators claim the right to noncompliance with mask wearing and to any other measures against the coronavirus that may come, arguing that consent to mask wearing, contact tracing, or vaccines opens the door to giving the state permanently more power to discipline and punish denizens without recourse.

While it would be easier to simply dismiss those worried about surveillance, there are serious societal considerations. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), one of the strongest defenders of public rights, which protects the free speech and privacy of both

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43. Eli Saslow, *Rising out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, First edition (New York: Doubleday, 2018).

44. In this vein, Bertholt Brecht (1935) wrote, “Fascism is the true face of capitalism,” and Horkheimer averred that fascism is the final destination of capitalism. Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972).

45. See Arendt on “natality”: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

46. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (London New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 220.

right- and left-wing individuals and organizations under First Amendment Rights threats, released a white paper discussing how the contact tracing applications deployed to track the spread of the corona virus might likely continue long after pandemic subsides.<sup>47</sup> They label this tendency to make permanent temporary broaches of privacy “mission creep.”

Already, India has required all released criminals (on bail or otherwise) to download and use the Aarogya Setu corona contract tracing smartphone application, while the “digital India” government campaign is in the process of “creating a searchable database that can track every aspect of citizens’ lives, including their religion, caste, income, property, education, marital status, employment, disability and family-tree.” Tunisia’s contact tracing occurred without notification through the government monitoring via the phone’s sim card, a trend of privacy breach that seems like a holdover from the rampant digital abuses of the previous Ben Ali dictatorial regime’s surveillance state. And in Peru where more are concerned about hunger than the high rate of corona deaths, a SMS requesting personal data and multiple surveys claims that personal data is kept “only during the state of emergency that had been decreed by the government” or “until that you decide to revoke your consent” but the current state of emergency has so far been extended five times, and civilian claims requesting to revoke consent go unanswered.<sup>48</sup> All of these instances of mission creep suggest that the corona pandemic is being exploited as a surveillance bonanza for purposes far beyond the immediate public health crisis.

To think that the new martial law and state of exception will be temporary, that democratic power will be restored, that abuses of private information will melt away, is naïve. Just as 9/11 unleashed the normalization of violent preemptive retaliation (a performative oxymoron) and the militarization of air travel, so too the surveillance apparatus of contact tracing delivers technologies that have been waiting in the wings to permanently further centrally control human beings. At the same time, these same protesters freely give their information away to private companies to enjoy their smartphones, allowing contact tracing for nonpublic health reasons, such as selling data to third-party contractors and advertisers.

Both conspiracy theorists and liberals in the state of emergency seem to share a religiosity that William James biographer Robert Richardson summarizes as the belief that there is something wrong with the world, and that it can be set right through some sort of effort or loyalty.<sup>49</sup> Thus, obedience to a course of actions is posited as causally bringing about the desirable state of affairs, correcting the problem. This messianic approach to problem-solving aims take a single way of life to be not only recommended, but mandatory. In social media, both establishment denunciations of scofflaws and the scofflaws themselves portray themselves and identify as the last barrier against fascism.

47. Daniel Kahn Gillmor, “ACLU White Paper—Principles for Technology-Assisted Contact-Tracing,” American Civil Liberties Union, April 16, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/report/aclu-white-paper-principles-technology-assisted-contact-tracing>

48. Morgan Meaker, “The Pandemic Will End. But in India, Tunisia and Peru, There Are Signs the Surveillance Will Not,” *The Correspondent*, September 3, 2020, <https://thecorrespondent.com/663/the-pandemic-will-end-but-in-india-tunisia-and-peru-there-are-signs-the-surveillance-will-not/86876826894-2b69b19c>

49. Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, 1. Mariner books ed, A Mariner Book (Boston, [Mass.]: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

Both of these extremes are in a negative dialectic of one-upmanship with the other, leading to irrational outcomes. By not taking sufficient precautions, more severe public health measures are viewed as necessary and justified, even if they contravene standard rights of privacy and personal freedoms. Thus the US's First Amendment and Fourth Amendment rights are eating each other up. As more people flaunt common sense, rebelling against public health programs, the more draconian public health programs become. Neither party, apparently, is aware of the will-to-punish and self-punishing involved in this race-to-the-bottom of mutual dehumanization.

The excluded middle between militant deniers and authoritarian versions of public health is friendly critics. Critical thinking in theory and practice has lost respectfulness in contemporary debates around the coronavirus. Positions in between or orthogonal to these newly staked poles have become a no-man's land, attacked from the left and right. Little discursive space is reserved for nuance or complexity in either domain. Bakhtin scholar Michael Gardiner writes that "Bakhtin views ideology as the essential symbolic medium through which all social relations are necessarily constituted."<sup>50</sup> We cannot (pretend to) do without ideology. Ideology is semiotic in nature, struggling over the signification of signs. What we can do, is become aware of this struggle as unavoidable but also generative, and not prop up ideologies as mutually exclusive. For ideological conflict to become productive, however, requires reestablishing sincere commitments to discourse through lowering perceptions of stakes, even if they seem existential. For Bakhtin, the elements of "folk carnival humor" such as parody, burlesque, and mock solemnity comprise the tools for reconciling opposing ideological cultures by lowering the temperature of discussions.<sup>51</sup>

Recognizing the generativity of ideological clashes does not mean erasing distinctions between *episteme* and *doxa*. That is part of the mistake that got us into this mess to begin with. Given the legacies of not just the first generation of the science wars in the 1980s and 1990s, but also insights from current science and technology studies (STS) research, it is suspect, however, to treat science as a monolith, instead of a constant agnostic enterprise full of dissenting scientists—some more legitimately or sincerely dissenting than others.<sup>52</sup> Conflicts of interest, for example, often have led to false equivalencies and manufactured debates in science, such as whether smoking causes diseases like cancer or fossil fuels cause global warming (or, if anthropogenic global warming even existed). Uniquely however, in the context of the coronavirus, there has been no room for false equivalencies. Apparently, on other topics, false equivalencies are

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50. Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.

51. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 4.

52. Steven Shapin, *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as If It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010); Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*, International Library of Sociology (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004); Sheila Jasanoff, "Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity," in *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power* (Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, eds) (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 1–33.

*de rigueur* for standard public health threats. Because of the state of exception invoked, however, even legitimate disagreements made by scientists, statisticians, politicians, or doctors regarding the now quite nebulous set of official public health positions and commitments that constitute the core of corona correctness are taken as threats to all parts of public health (e.g., the media and medical radio silence regarding the Great Barrington Declaration of medical practitioners and scientists arguing for a different approach of “focused protection” in addressing the pandemic).<sup>53</sup> It is almost as if government agencies and broadcast news sources have been infected with an equal but opposite moral panic as that of conspiracy theorists.

A medical doctor colleague recently quipped: “There are two types of people online these days: people who have strong opinions about what therapies work in COVID; and people who actually treat COVID patients.” Armchair philosophizing or arms-length public health, a replacement of expert opinion and firsthand experience with idolatry of random and promoted social media moguls, represents a fundamental inversion of authority. Those with knowledge are scorned as paternalistic and harboring a secret agenda, while those with actual material conflicts of financial and social interests are lauded as exposing massive cover-ups and telling the “truth” despite being under terrible duress to stifle crucial “information.” Manufacturing facts through valiantly battling against endless cover-up, provides the perfect alibi for enclosing oneself inside a hermeneutic circle with enough toilet paper to last a lifetime.

Once polarization takes over, it is very hard to break out of it. Not only does polarization lead to reduced capacity for reflection, but reflexivity becomes suspect as a liability weakening the group’s position rather than an asset helping it extend its constituency as well as a protective against fatal flaws. Once disagreements turn into irreconcilable enmity, the endgame becomes dehumanization and jockeying for control of the apparatus of violence, state-controlled and otherwise. Whether the science wars, the war on terror, or the war for the White House, the military metaphors betray an actual unwillingness to hear what disagreeing parties have to offer, instead casting them as outgroup enemies challenging the existence of one’s own group.

The loss of critique tragically occurs as the various strands complicating ‘sides’ become strange bedfellows. Polarization foregoes self-reflexive behavior and space for people to admit their mistakes and ambivalences, driving each faction into further entrenched warfare, leading to irrational and unwanted outcomes, even for those provoking them. For example, a society without any biological boundaries or precautions against the spread of the coronavirus is as equally distasteful as one requiring continuously updated mandatory vaccinations, restriction of virtually all mobility, booming mental health issues and suicides, and economic problems from draconian lockdowns and bio-governmentality. The full harms associated with the corona pandemic response may result unwittingly in iatrogenic policies: interventions intended to make things better which may in raw numbers result in outcomes more deadly than the disease the treatment sought to cure.

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53. Martin Kulldorff, Sunetra Gupta, and Jay Bhattacharya, “Great Barrington Declaration and Petition,” *Great Barrington Declaration*, October 4, 2020, <https://gbdeclaration.org/>

This semiotic shift from threats of literal life and limb to the swollen symbolic sphere, fighting over memes and straw man positions overextending the actual beliefs of membership, means that any possible disagreement amplified enough can turn into a nuclear standoff. Jonathan Metzl describes in *Dying of Whiteness* this phenomenon of symbolic allegiance eclipsing even basic survival instincts of biological health: “because of the frames cast around these and other issues hued with historically charged assumptions about privilege, it became ever-more difficult for many people with whom I spoke to imagine alternate realities or to empathize with groups other than their own. Compromise, in many ways, coded as treason.”<sup>54</sup> Backlash governance and anti-governance, trying to punish more than to heal, exacerbates polarizing, bad-faith politics.

Those espousing contemporary claims to alternative suites or configurations of commitments to the currently entrenched and overriding “authoritative discourse” of their particular epistemic tribe are likely to be accused of being in the offending opposite party, and ostracized. Through their oppositionality, unwittingly both corona deniers and corona literalists generate precisely the twin futures they most fear. The Manichean set up of good and evil has excluded the middle ground of thoroughgoing critique. If conspiracy theories often result from truncated critical thinking—critical enough to doubt the official narratives, but not sufficiently critical to doubt the finality of their own alternatives—through their disinterest and lack of sincere dialog polarizing discourses lock each other into often increasingly extreme positions. Like clockwork, this drives those with novel bridge-building insights to shut up and refuse to contribute to public discourse for fear of retribution (from one side or the other, or both).

#### IV. The Corona Carnavalesque

Bakhtin’s understanding of the reconciliatory cultural technology of the carnivalesque helps decode this polarization by identifying both the most effective resolute strategies and cul-de-sacs. The carnivalesque illuminates an element missing from contemporary interpretations of the corona state of exception conflict. YouTube identity-politics critic ContraPoints encapsulates this state change: “the 21st century is an aesthetic century. In history there are ages of reason and ages of spectacle; and it’s important to know what you’re in. Our America, our Internet, is not ancient Athens. It’s Rome. And your problem is you think you are in the Forum when you’re really in the Circus.”<sup>55</sup> The problem with an aestheticized politics, however, is that performances even more than arguments require a shared lifeworld to felicitously interpret. The more bifurcated the background assumptions, the more volatile the interpretation of the performance.

The contrasting interpretations of the coronavirus can be read as a *heteroglossia* differentiating various tribes or subcultures that have congealed into dualistic antagonisms. The schisms these are based on preexisted the actual pandemic. But as a flashpoint, the

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54. Jonathan Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America’s Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 11.

55. ContraPoints, *The Aesthetic*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1afqR5QkDM&feature=youtu.be>

pandemic ignited antagonism into real existential threats between groups, and this polarizing discourse closed off other options, viewpoints, and epistemic cultures in public debate previously accepted as part of the conversation, however marginally. Like philosophical pragmatists, Bakhtin's post-Hegelian dialogical notion of the self secures us as porous—constituted from conversations and contestations over the nature of reality. The rupture of a cohesive lifeworld, therefore, indicates the shattering of a stability based not on discursive principles of equity, freedom, and sincerity but on extreme asymmetries in power. The political theorist Sheldon Wolin long suspected that “‘managed democracy’ [has become] the smiley face of inverted totalitarianism,” the *de facto* and *crypto-de jure* repeal of the constitutional rights of citizens to accommodate the circular flow of power between industry and the megastate.<sup>56</sup> This manifests especially chaotically in the US context, norms, and consensus—the Overton window—which has traditionally been monopolized by state-compliant broadcast media. The breakdown of controlled-narrative media with the appearance of subterranean social media networks, however, threatens this project—with both opportunities and perils. The QAnon conspiracy, brewing since 2015, became the perfect enemy in waiting to assert control back over the Overton window, because of its violent incitations and brazen declarations of war on the “system,” offering an alternative millenarian ideology to disillusioned seekers. When the corona pandemic broke, the lumping of discourses quickly coalesced into the anti-statist versus status quo camps, excluding the plurality of voices critical of imperious extremism *and* managed democracy, both winner-take-all games.

The more the response to the coronavirus takes on an authoritarian/populist rather than a dialogical character, the more partisan and less nuanced will be the opinions publicly aired. When positions and decisions are made via acclamation versus election, choice is further funneled, shutting off contact between options. The pluralist William Connolly has written descriptively, not normatively, about the common desire in antagonistic politics to punish perceived wrong-doers, and the deeper democratic need for a desire to forgive, understand, and “scramble” the polarizations comprising declensionist democratic politics away from a two-sided impasse.<sup>57</sup> The will to punish/control and the prerequisite subordinating and guilt assignment of the other are all latent human tics exacerbated through trucking in dualistic discourse.

Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque arose from diachronically studying the textual genre of the novel, emphasizing how “authoritative discourse” makes certain demands of allegiance, which nonetheless can be undermined by hybrid utterances—the carnivalesque being the most epistemically destabilizing. Analyzing the unfolding discourse around the coronavirus through a carnivalesque discourse perspective from the WHO to state health authorities to friendly critics, to push back from science-skeptical libertarians, religious fundamentalists, and conspiracy theorists may be revealing. This is no simple task, because the life-and-death stakes of the pandemic make it that much more difficult to try on adjacent perspectives. Yet, precisely what has been missing in this event has been the

56. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, New edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p.xvi.

57. William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Borderlines, v. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

ability for bridging and contorting across the various poles to bring us back to plurality. As Nadia Urbinati has reminded us, “polarization seems to be a denial rather than a manifestation of pluralism.”<sup>58</sup> So, what might a democratic, pluralist state of exception look like?

During the birth of modernity, the carnivalesque body of the medieval period slowly becomes tamed and disciplined according to the exigencies of larger political orders, governed by courtly manners and protocols. The birth of “civility” ushered in a stable social order that could no longer afford the periodic therapeutic disruptions of hierarchies. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin cites Desiderius Erasmus’ “In Praise of Folly” as “one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature,”<sup>59</sup> embodying the productive heckling of dominant customs and mores. The joker or jester, as part of the royal court privileged with the ability of speaking uncomfortable truths and get away with it by virtue of creating a moral temporary autonomous zone of play, carnivalesque events and projects permeate dualistic discourses and create productive dialogs, reminding monological discourses of their dialogical origins. The carnivalesque involves a theatrical reversal of traditional social roles through a punctuated (but always present) Nietzschean transvaluation of values. Instead of worshipping God the Father, Earth the Mother becomes the entity of celebration. Rather than reaching up arms extended, one kneels and brings hands and crown to meet the mud, pouring back and soaking up terrestrial corporeality. This direct contact with *materia*, which became disdained later in the Enlightenment in various forms, provided an alternative to the idealist promise of escaping from the flesh and all connected to it. Enlightenment’s universalism soon opted for the ideal over the real, and the wild body and its complications for standardization became seen as profane. Precisely the techniques of the carnivalesque, burlesquing the boundary-keeping of polarized debates, facilitates recognition of the actual plural constitution of dialogical discourse.

The success of the counterinsurgency against established centralized public health has been in the “carnivalization” of science, potentially interpreted as cynicism toward the medical. Medical and public health interventions operate in balance with social license. Should this license be withdrawn, the institutions administering these health-focused fields’ directives can either use violence to make people comply or become sidelined. Either way, they lose their tremendous power as respected institutions of moral authority, effective through their social respect and heft alone. Thus, it is no small matter for a serious counter-narrative to challenge an official medical model once consensus has coalesced around it.

Neoliberal institutions of medicine and public health understandably could be predicted in a state of emergency to close ranks against those questioning their means or ends. This has occurred with the coronavirus pandemic on the global information level, with an ever-narrowing band of acceptable discourse even legible on search engines,

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58. Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 160.

59. Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 14.

news, and social media, to the exclusion often of even friendly critics and sincere experts. The loyal opposition suddenly has become seen as traitorous, lumped in with extremists and conspiracy theorists.

In contrast, Bakhtin's description of cross-cultural dialogue requires that separate epistemic cultures actually are willing to interact with each other:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue. . . . We seek answers to our own questions in [the foreign culture]; and [it] responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. . . . Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched.<sup>60</sup>

While conspiracy theories are often viewed as a vestige of religious superstition, pseudoscientific explanations for phenomena achieved through flawed use of evidence, selectively cherry-pick evidence, and ignoring or disputing all evidence that would dispel their theories, the emotional impulse behind them usually contains crucial insights into the failures of standard narratives to be reflexive and open to critique. For example, with the Swedish approach to handling the coronavirus, which has been often publicly glossed as permissive at best, undermines claims that a hard lockdown—with all of its entailing economic, chronic disease, and mental health harms—should be adopted unreflectively. In a political dialog over the pandemic, instead of active failure to engage with other paradigms, frank discussions of advantages and disadvantages would allow for deeper understanding of what a given polity is doing, and unflinching discussion of the real sacrifices.

Disavowal of such discussions constitutes an antipolitics, or depoliticization of collective action into institutional technocracy. Sousa suggests that “[d]uring the transition period we are in, still dominated by metonymic and proleptic reason, negative universalism is perhaps best formulated as a residual general theory: a general theory about the impossibility of a general theory.”<sup>61</sup> Proleptic reason is the type of reason which excludes care for the future—constituting a lazy reason, in the view of Sousa. In proleptic reasoning the sole object of concern is the narrowly configured present—the future thus envisaged is contracted into the notion of the present, neglecting any prospective possibilities therein.<sup>62</sup> Such frames of reasoning are self-sure, admitting no challenge or change. Prolepsis as an antagonistic, defensive form of reason, aims to preemptorily close off dialogue, cutting off the underappreciated public virtue of civility.

Part of the historical distancing from the threats of natural forces involved erecting protocols for performing civility. The “civil, and thus truly human, society was solely the creation of an act of will.”<sup>63</sup> The emergent *ius gentium* or law of nations, was not a formal

60. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee, n.d., p. 7.

61. Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, p. 220.

62. Santos, 182–83.

63. Anthony Pagden, “Human Rights, Natural Rights, And Europe’s Imperial Legacy,” *Political Theory* 31(2) (April 2003): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591702251008>

law of national or international courts; instead it consisted of “practices of the self” writ large, enforced by European states through microgoverning agreed-upon customs of civility and sociability.<sup>64</sup> For better or worse, it christened the dawn of universal standards of polite comportment. As previously excluded groups got political rights, however, standards of civility have not been similarly updated to reflect the diversity of legitimate ways of appearing and acting in public.<sup>65</sup>

All emergency measures and states of exception should have sunsets. Machiavelli argued that dictatorships are an appropriate response to some circumstances, but that they must be constitutionally based and time-limited.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, the states of exception in the past century have tended toward concentrations of power maintained after the threat dissipated.<sup>67</sup> Naomi Klein chronicles how shocks that deeply traumatize populations have often been used as cover to institute nefarious policies that fleece economically, socially, and ecologically the commons of a people and land. This often is premeditated, with disaster plans on the shelf, just waiting for the next disaster to come along for their implementation.

Democratic US presidential candidate Joe Biden, for example, tweeted on August 16, 2020, “We need nationwide mask mandates.”<sup>68</sup> The actual statement is not remarkable; the stance it took *against* the prevailing federal guidelines—the establishment against the (anti-)establishment—is. The rise of anti-science propaganda and disinformation based on the QAnon conspiracy finding traction in Fox News represents the anti-establishment conquering the established organs of state and media/financial power—the predictable mismanagement of a managed democracy.

The political koan for our time might be: if governments default into permanent states of emergency, are they still democracies? The judicial powers used for states of emergency all too often reproduce discriminatory policing and perpetuate institutionalized forms of bigotry and expendability. Already, Australia is jockeying to extend its short-term emergency powers for much longer time periods, alarming human rights advocates sensitive to the harmful effects this has not just for democracy, but for those most historically discriminated against in the polity.<sup>69</sup> On the level of international politics, the measures of various

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64. Yogi Hale Hendlin, “From Terra Nullius to Terra Communis: Reconsidering Wild Land in an Era of Conservation and Indigenous Rights,” *Environmental Philosophy* 11(2) (2014), 141–74, <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20143205>

65. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

66. Marco Geuna, “Machiavelli and the Problem of Dictatorship: Machiavelli and the Problem of Dictatorship,” *Ratio Juris* 28(2) (June 2015), 226–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/raju.12078>

67. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 1st edition (Picador, 2008).

68. “Joe Biden on Twitter,” Twitter, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1295012690755112967>

69. Calla Wahlquist, “Victorian Plan to Extend State of Emergency by 12 Months Prompts Human Rights Concerns,” *the Guardian*, August 24, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/aug/24/victorian-plan-to-extend-state-of-emergency-by-12-months-prompts-human-rights-concerns>

governments responding to the corona crisis could be seen as a sophisticated version of virtue signaling, as much as group cohesion is sought on an individual level. Virtue signaling advertises one's knowledge of and adherence to a moral framework standardized for a given group in order to receive praise and recognition within that group. To signal adherence to a group's doctrine to others (but mostly to those within that group) is typically an energetically inexpensive way of achieving status in a given group. Individually, it pays off; but collectively, it can have devastating effects.

## V. Maybe the Noosphere Wasn't Meant to be Centralized. . .

The slide from pluralism to dualism in discourse, from acknowledging *heteroglossia* to mutually exclusive discourses, can be interpreted as a move from viewing democratic conflict as ensconced in a larger commitment to work together in partnership, to an antagonism aimed at domination. Riane Eisler, pioneer in the field of partnership studies, contrasts domination, ranked hierarchical systems, with partnership forms of organizing society based on acknowledged interdependence.<sup>70</sup> Whereas domination systems aim to end with vanquishers and the vanquished, partnership societies instead aim at a *modus vivendi* where dialog can continue without ever needing to cut off relations. In other parlance, this is the difference between playing a finite and an infinite game.<sup>71</sup> The echoes of Sousa's diachronism and critique of prolepsis is evident: taking into account the future means that there can be no final ending, and thus the goal of domination is revealed as inchoate. Of course, how to move from antipathy to goodwill is no simple task. But we do know that reestablishing commons—the mental, linguistic, and cultural planetary commons of reason, the noosphere, relies on heteroglossic exchange for our continued evolution: the more we orient toward cultures of domination, the more stressful it is for all members involved. The supposition that actually existing human beings have identities seamless with the establishment or anti-establishment imaginaries posited and bolstered by polarizing discourse is itself absurd.

As our economies have become more efficient, people have become more stressed, which makes it more difficult to have the energy, time, and courage to confront opinions and ideas anathema to their beliefs. The tragedy of social distancing is that precisely when we need more direct engagement to diffuse the mutual dehumanization, these opportunities have vanished and virtualized in highly orchestrated media. While especially those who already most suffer from social isolation will benefit from making communities more inclusive and interactive, all members of a given community will also benefit.<sup>72</sup> So far, the coronavirus response by institutions has tended toward domination.

70. Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

71. James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

72. Ron Amundson, "Disability, Ideology, and Quality of Life," in *Quality of Life and Human Difference: Genetic Testing, Health Care, and Disability* (David Wasserman, Jerome Bickenbach, and Robert Wachbroit, eds) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 101–24, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/985476>

Under the cover of emergency, responses instead have forced people to take quick and drastic courses of action without also investing simultaneously in exercises in public reasoning with the array of friendly critics and naysayers, identifying their points of resistance, addressing them in a dialogic fashion, acknowledging both the agonistic and consensus modes of discourse in a Bakhtinian sense, then reassessing course.

Karl Popper recognized that his Paradox of Tolerance is also a Paradox of Intolerance. Too much tolerance is just as acidic to democracies as too much intolerance. Denialists breed intolerance in liberal establishment organizations and people, which causes a circling of the wagons that short-circuits reflection and critical thinking, creating a downward spiral. Establishment scientists and politicians have tendencies to rig dog-whistles which they themselves will be triggered by, precipitating attempts to shut down those contradicting, questioning, or dismissing their serious and fragile official story. The official story, even if it turns out to be wrong or needs updating, becomes encumbered by reactive defensiveness, for fear that if it is not zealously defended, the conspiracy theorists win. One could argue that while this liberal action occurs because of exogenous stimuli (a perceived mortal threat), these changes and threats in the political environment nonetheless ignite native “epigenetic” features in liberalism. The tendency to be tolerant, in this case, has real and significant limits when it is tested against unreasonable threats. Denialism is the Achilles’ heel of liberalism, causing liberalism to metamorphosize into its tyrannical variety as a self-described last-stand stop-gap against ideological annihilation. Proclaiming that liberal systems and institutions, such as democratic elections, are inherently corrupt or illegitimate undermines and threatens the liberal order at its core. Outright denial of the justification of liberal institutions in such manners forces the hand of liberalism to crack down on these beliefs, mutating if it wants to prevail, no matter the means: branding those disagreeing with the official undebatable course of action as uneducated, less human, or enemies of the state deepens the rift between denialists and the liberal order.

If dehumanizing is off the table as a productive methodology, what are we left with? Habermas’s theory of communicative action offers one option.<sup>73</sup> Recent examples of people with minority backgrounds befriending and disarming white supremacists offers an entryway to change through sincere mutual understanding.<sup>74</sup> But how to discourse across such disparate lifeworlds? Here, Bakhtin’s insights on the carnivalesque become concretely useful: one must start from commonalities. The experimental philosophical work done on meta-consensus is one contender for jumping valences to find initial things that we can agree upon and then work from there to find the highest-level sticking points to constructively work through.<sup>75</sup> Another option is engaging would-be enemies in other

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73. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

74. Bethany Mandel, “We Need To Start Befriending Neo Nazis,” *The Forward*, August 24, 2017, <https://forward.com/opinion/380510/we-need-to-start-befriending-neo-nazis/>; Eli Saslow, *Rising out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, First edition (New York: Doubleday, 2018).

75. Simon Niemeyer and John S. Dryzek, “The Ends of Deliberation: Meta-Consensus and Inter-Subjective Rationality as Ideal Outcomes,” *Swiss Political Science Review* 13(4) (2007), 497–526.

voluntary activities in which personal bonds can be formed, which do not deal foremost with sore ideological differences. Mandatory civil service requirements, such as those in many countries for those coming of age, throws together disparate members of ethnic, gender, social, economic, and political groups and ideologies so that they can relate on a humane level with those different in various ways from themselves, sharing accomplishments and failures, fears and hopes, softening their edges, developing civility and rapport. A mandatory one-year green corps, for example, engaging in environmental projects, might be one way to help create more of a sense of civility and cohesion. Proposals throwing together disparate groups of (especially young) people together along contrastive ideological lines, connecting first on a personal level, may disarm latent extremism, which otherwise could be provoked. These situations install non-reactive settings for jokes, play, and hybrid, foreign, and improvised rituals that create friendships able to deal with ideological clashes in nonviolent, committed ways.<sup>76</sup>

Dedication to working out differences politically rather than through force, and seeing disagreements as reconcilable, through shared governance rather than authority over, does not mean that extremist views should be tolerated to dominate. But neither does the state dominating real and perceived extremists get us any closer to a *détente*, either. The corona pandemic represents not just an existential biological threat, but a threat to democracy as well. The dehumanization of the perceived enemy—emanating from both public health adherents and those fearful of the over-exercise of state power—is the perfect storm for dismantling the civility of democracy and forgetting the need to coexist. Yet, if the United States and other like countries are going to persist as democracies, the no man's land between non-democratic public health decisionism and its violent reaction will have to be bridged. And that bridge will come from lowering the stakes, becoming aware of each perspective's ideological elements rather than taking them as sacrosanct, and finding spaces to play and jest at the absurdity of each side goading the other into more dire and dominating action. By becoming aware of how each ideology's edge requires the competing worldview to define itself against it, and then hopefully finding skillful modes of *détournement* to reroute animosities into shared tragi-comedies, Bakhtin offers both diagnosis and treatment to our current pandemic of political disorientation.

The ability and freedom to reason critically in public without fear of ostracization is an old philosophical problem. Times of crisis and emergency are precisely when we need plural beliefs and perspectives, reflecting the actual complexities of people, more than ever. Courageously expressing the oblique perspectives ill-suited for authoritative monologues productively disrupts concentrations of power in oppositional perspectives through carnivalesque politics, and can revive terminally ill politics when rancor rather than resolution opens too wide a gap between the real and the (ir)rational.

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76. Yogi Hendlin, "I Am a Fake Loop: the Effects of Advertising-Based Artificial Selection," *Biosemiotics*, 12 (2019), 131–156, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-018-9341-z>