
Critical Exchange

Politics in the Time of COVID

Stefanie R. Fishel

University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, QLD 4556, Australia
sfishel@usc.edu.au

Andrew Fletcher

University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA
acfletcher@crimson.ua.edu

Sankaran Krishna

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA
krishna@hawaii.edu

Utz McKnight

University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA
utz.mcknight@ua.edu

Gitte du Plessis

University of Tampere, 33100 Tampere, Finland
gitte.duplessis@tuni.fi

Chad Shomura

University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA
chad.shomura@ucdenver.edu

Alicia Valdés

Rovira Virgili University, 43007 Tarragona, Catalunya, Spain
atalialicia.valdes@urv.cat

Nadine Voelkner

University of Groningen, 9701 Groningen, Netherlands
nadine.voelkner@rug.nl

Contemporary Political Theory (2021) **20**, 657–689. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00500-1>; advance online publication 1 June 2021



need to inform political relationships and subvert the classical Schmittian antagonism. Furthermore, the centering of these elements allows us to reverse the denial of bodily interdependence.

The facemask paradigm thus introduces a new feminist political relationship that presupposes self-analysis, i.e., a political self-critique that articulates bodily coalitions. This coalition would imply a collective response to the horrible consequences of this pandemic by those suffering disproportionately from the effects of this crisis. Thus, precarious subjects could establish bonds that create a political coalition by putting shared vulnerability at the center of the political struggle. Not only has the virus made visible the inherent vulnerability of bodies, but it has also exposed how my own body could become a threat to the ‘other’ by functioning as a means of contagion. To think of political relationships as inverse antagonism allows for a politics of care and precaution towards the ‘other.’

Alicia Valdés

Theory in survival time

I mistook the prompt for what the COVID-19 pandemic might *teach* about politics, rather than what it might show or tell. Fortunately, the pandemic has forced a reckoning with mistakes. They illuminate that failure has potential, that falling apart is a tendency internal to life, and that the quieter, softer parts of ourselves have not been nourished, may never have been nourished, yet may prove to have been vital for survival all along...

Of course, show-and-tell is a kind of teaching wherein students role-play as teachers. It is an activity most common at a formative age when youth are not only learning, but also learning how to learn. This invaluable mode of being, unfortunately, is often packaged as a developmental stage before making a difference ‘in the real world,’ which is to say, being productive in late capitalism.

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic is a time for action, not thinking. Politicians, business owners, university administrators, and so many more have scrambled to make pandemic life approximate ‘normal life.’ Students must learn, workers must work. The rush to get back on track to an interrupted future closes down the time for thinking. Stopping to think is supposedly a marker of privilege and gross negligence of people who are suffering, dying, and desperate for help.

Yes, theory can be lofty. And yes, it can disregard real struggles. This is surely true when the pandemic is seized as a chance to spin old theories into the genre of omens. But perhaps theory is necessary when the world crashes against the rocks of the new – when ‘Something in the world forces us to think,’ as Gilles Deleuze (1994, p. 139) was fond of saying.

For Deleuze, thinking is a rare event. When the world is stable, it can be navigated with mere recognition. Only when the snug fit between subject, object,



and concept is torn apart does thinking commence. One might say that we are tasked with learning how to learn. Thinking happens only when the world falls apart or is revealed to have been in chaos. It initiates a reconfiguration of the self.

If so, then the COVID-19 pandemic is an exceptionally thinky time. Theory is not a luxury but an inevitability. This is so especially for survivors of racial capitalism and settler colonialism who have had to think all the time: how to gather food, how to balance too many jobs, how to balance none, how to fend off cops, how to run, how to move through another wave of grief in a vast sea of mourning. The pandemic has dragged more people into this, intensified precarity for those already there, and thrown up new hardship, too. It is a time of protracted unraveling for some, another episode of never having access to fantasies of wholeness for others. It is a time of ‘crisis ordinariness,’ a slow burn that promises to erupt (Berlant, 2011, p. 10).

Gloria Anzaldúa helps us to understand how the minoritized calibrate to a rickety world. She elaborated *la facultad* as a kind of nonconceptual thinking that is exquisitely attuned to shifts in ordinary life. One stays on high alert for impending violence. The signs are everywhere: a particular look, a certain tone of voice. Yet this is not mere recognition. While *la facultad* begins with ‘anything that breaks into one’s everyday more of perception,’ it ultimately ‘deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld’ (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 61). While Deleuze distinguished between recognition and thought, Anzaldúa blurred them. *La facultad* is vital for efforts to survive deep, dangerous uncertainty.

‘The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world’ (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 60). What could it mean to be excruciatingly alive to the deathly world of COVID-19? Here’s a thought: The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a time of death but also of life, immense life. Early 2020 saw the unusual appearance of nonhuman animals in spaces emptied of human presence: Hanauma Bay in Hawai’i, for instance. The aquatic ecosystem of the popular tourist destination has long been damaged by heavy traffic, garbage, and coral-damaging sunscreens. Yet when the tourist industry ground to a halt due to the closure of transpacific travel, something remarkable happened. For months, there was a colorful explosion of fish, sea turtles, and monk seals along with the rapid regrowth of coral. This happened elsewhere in Hawai’i, too. Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) were able to intimately reconnect with a life that is hard to access when settler capitalism marches on (Goodyear-Ka’ōpuā, 2020).

Mass rewildings like this draw attention to life beyond the human. I am not parroting the ecofascist refrain of ‘humans are the virus.’ That would be to mistake subjectivity under extractive capitalism for humanity and to erase Native peoples who have long fostered healthy relationships with the natural world. Instead, my point is to withdraw anthropocentric, which is to say racist and colonialist,



frameworks of life. As Anna Tsing writes in a different context, ‘Without Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life.’ (2015, p. vii)

I offer a different thought: All creatures were not really dead but living a secret life that has become vividly palpable. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it easier to sense forms of life that are inching out of their usual cover, beckoning us to other worlds...

Meanwhile, there has been a spike in think pieces about the use of biopolitics to explain the pandemic. Here I am more interested in biopolitics as a regime of truth than an analytic concept. Resonant with Nadine Voelkner and Gitte du Plessis’s Contribution to this Critical Exchange, I ask: How have the institutions and theories of biopower advanced particular figurations of life at the expense of others? How might the truth-effects of biopower be dispelled by elevating other figurations of life?

Biopolitics plots life in relation to death, whether in spectacular acts of killing or in zones of heightened risk, unhealthiness, or reduced life chances. Life is held to be a quality of some entities but not others. Deleuze (1997) offered an alternative: ‘a life’ is not a corporeal property or biological feature. ‘A life is everywhere, in all the moments a certain living subject passes through and that certain lived objects regulate... This indefinite life does not itself have moments, however close together they might be, but only meantimes, between-moments’ (Deleuze, 1997, p. 5). A life is immanence itself, an in-folding of bodies into an event that changes all. It is not the opposite of death. Its exteriority is its own future forms.

Countless forms of a life have been opened as the novel coronavirus has circulated through bodies, across borders, in public discourse, through social institutions. COVID-19 has solicited ruthless austerity and cruel disregard. It has also opened networks of mutual aid, new forms of care, and reimaginings of sociality. A life is not ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ At stake in a life is the potential emergence of worlds. The political task is gauging which should be fostered, and how.

Investing in this notion of life may be pointless, even callous. ‘The life worth living is not necessarily found within these zones of maximal potential,’ Elizabeth Povinelli insists, ‘because the zones create such reduced conditions of life that the political desire for them to spawn or foster alternative worlds can seem naive at best and sadistic at worst’ (2011, p. 128). The abandoned may not live long enough to inhabit the alternative worlds discerned by those in life-sustaining conditions. States of emergency may be states of emergence, but for whom? Do theories of life otherwise redress distributions of death? Or do they intensify them?

My aim is to relax the notions of life enforced by modern biopower: not to dispense with, but to relax. Staying alive is important, especially for those abandoned to death. Yet the prolongation of biological life alone may not be convivial to survival.

Giorgio Agamben (1998) has observed that mass lethality follows the delineation of biological and political life. Yet, he has not elaborated enough how this



biopolitical separation boils down life to mere survival – or survival to mere life. Biopolitics separates the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of life. Various needs, desires, and practices are deemed to be excessive even if they are vital for endurance. This disallowance is extermination that does not appear as killing. For example, settler colonialism depends upon the construction of settler society just as much as direct murder (Wolfe, 2006). The fallout of separating mere life and more life typically lands on racialized and Native peoples, though no one is fully spared.

The COVID-19 pandemic calls for other forms of survival. Bonnie Honig argues that while emergency politics reduces survival to staying alive, ‘survival... carries promisingly plural meanings, connoting not just the mere life to which emergency seeks to reduce us, but also the more life – *sur-vivre* – of emergence’ (2009, p. xviii).

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored that survival is communal. It is the unequal, shared labor of persisting together. It is reaching out, dropping by, feeding each other, nurturing each other, holding vulnerability in common. It is collectively thinking through the immensity of it all. Survival is generating the more life that is mere life, together.

The labor of survival is conceptual and material, for it advances figurations of life that are disallowed by biopower. It is the processing of affect in creative adaptations: how a body feels about, withdraws, leans into the world, leans into others. It is, to pilfer from Marx (1988, p. 107), the senses operating as theoreticians to manage intensified discomposure.

Yet survival is not only a reaction to what threatens life. It is experimentation with minor needs, desires, and longings. It is not only about staying afloat. It rides the surge of life where biopower would have us see only death. Survival is not securing a place in the world but the direct pursuit of other worlds. Sometimes, there are clear visions, but survival is typically moved by intuition. The body reaches far into the future as conscious awareness and sociopolitical conditions lag behind. The aim of theory in survival time is to close the gap.

It may seem that my second mistake has been to discuss what the COVID-19 pandemic can teach about *theory*. Yet, life in the pandemic is a dense overlap between the theoretical and the political. So here is what the pandemic might teach us about politics that is theory that is politics:

- Don’t let death captivate the senses. That is a stultifying effect of biopower. Without forgetting death, foster sensitivity to minor forms of life that flow around, through, and within us;
- Tend to desires that are disallowed by power. Inject them into the here and now. Push for social and political infrastructure in which they could flourish;
- Explore speculative thought and experimental action. Let intuition lead us to the selves and communities that could be;
- Learn how to learn again.



The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the unlivability of the world anchored by racial capitalism and settler colonialism. Many of us already knew this. The epistemic conditions of that world did not sustain many of us then, and they certainly will not do so now. Thinking is now, as it was then, vital.

Theory in survival time is not thinking-about but thinking-around. Rather than reflection at a distance, it is deeply intimate with a world in disarray. It neither explains nor predicts but intervenes and inflects. Theory in survival time makes big claims on thin ground, for its highest fidelity is to futures that could be. It is patchy, loosey-goosey, crude.

Theory in survival time is raw thought in motion, ordinary praxis with extraordinary vision. It cuts the epistemic life support of failed systems of power. It nourishes the more life that is mere life. It is speculative, for it allies with the untested, the dismissed, the wildly imaginative. Yet it is thoroughly pragmatic. Its value will be measured, not in the world that failed many of us, but in worlds that could be, that are in the making now, that we are learning to make now, together.

Chad Shomura

References

- Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bell, D. (1987) *And we are Not Saved*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Coccia, M. (2020) Factors determining the diffusion of COVID-19 and suggested strategy to prevent future accelerated viral infectivity similar to COVID. *The Science of the Total Environment* 729: 138474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.138474>.
- Davis, M. (2002) *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*. London, UK: Verso Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by P. Patton. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1997) Immanence: A Life... Translated by N. Millett. *Theory, Culture, and Society* 14(2): 3–7.
- Farge, A. (2019) Thinking and Defining the Event in History. In: N. Luxon (ed.) *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 215–226.
- Fishel, S. (2017) *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at College de France 1975-1976*. New York: Picador Press.
- Frost, S. (2016) *Biocultural Creatures: Towards a New Theory of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press.



- Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, N. H. (2020) Talk given at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University.
- Guthman, J., & Mansfield, B. (2013) The implications of environmental epigenetics: a new direction for geographic inquiry on health, space, and nature-society relations. *Progress in Human Geography* 37(4): 486–504.
- Hinchliffe, S., Bingham, N., Allen, J., & Carter, S. (2016) *Pathological Lives: Disease, Space and Biopolitics*. New York: Wiley.
- Honig, B. (2009) *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hashimoto, S., et al. (2021) Our future: Experiencing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak and pandemic. *Respiratory investigation* 59(2): 169–179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resinv.2020.11.006>.
- Landecker, H., & Panofsky, A. (2013) From social structure to gene regulation, and back: A critical introduction to environmental epigenetics for sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 39: 333–357.
- Levinas, E. (1998a) *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1998b) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Lorenzini, D. (2020) Biopolitics in the Time of Coronavirus. *Critical Inquiry*, April 2.
- Lorimer, J. (2017) Parasites, ghosts and mutualists: A relational geography of microbes for global health. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42(4): 544–558.
- Malabou, C. (2015) Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed? In: B. Bhandar and J. Goldberg-Hiller (eds.) *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 35–46.
- Malabou, C. (2016) One life only: Biological resistance, political resistance. *Critical Inquiry* 42(3): 429–438.
- Marx, K. (1988) *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by M. Milligan. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Mbembe, A. (2020) 'The Universal Right to Breathe' *Critical Inquiry*, April 13. Translated by Carolyn Shread.
- Meloni, M. (2018) A postgenomic body: Histories, genealogy, politics. *Body & Society* 24: 3–38.
- Plowright, R. K., et al. (2021) Land use-induced spillover: A call to action to safeguard environmental, animal, and human health. *The Lancet. Planetary Health* 5(4): e237–e245. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00031-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00031-0).
- Povinelli, E. A. (2011) *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schmitt, C. (2007) *The Concept of the Political* (Expanded ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stannard, D. (1989) *Before the Horror: The Population of Hawai'i on the Eve of Western Contact*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009) In: P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte (eds.) *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th edn, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and J. Schulte. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wolfe, P. (2006) Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research* 8(4): 387–409.
- Zhan, J., et al. (2020) Environmental impacts on the transmission and evolution of COVID-19 combing the knowledge of pathogenic respiratory coronaviruses. *Environmental Pollution* 267(2020): 115621. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2020.115621>.



Zhu, Y., et al. (2020) Association between short-term exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 infection: Evidence from China. *The Science of the Total Environment* 727: 138704. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.138704>.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.