

# VIRAL CULTURE

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Little doubt exists among numerous cultural and political theorists and practitioners that the world has entered a new stage organized around a new system of meaning, where uncertainty and distance rule and the other is a figure of contagion: we will call this new stage “viral culture.” Predictions abound about the huge cultural and political influence of new viruses, such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) that, like all viruses, is a submicroscopic infectious agent that replicates only inside the living cells of an organism. Traditional cultural institutions and lifestyles are experiencing rapid political transformation. Concepts of protection and mobility, authoritarian populism, extermination, normality, operation, the city, biopolitics, language, life, the image, utopia, leisure, and even the idea of other people are just a few of the notions subject to the agent of change that is viral culture. Perceptions of measurement and theories of conjuncture, impressions of political leaders, models of confrontation and of the new, and even the ways in which we view ourselves as functioning before, during, and “after” the pandemic are all susceptible to change as the coronavirus is dispersed throughout global culture. So widespread is this dislocation of cultural traditions and taken-for-granted political arrangements that we introduce the concept of viral culture to summarize what is occurring.

This idea of the cultural dislocation of viral culture is explained by one of Europe’s foremost public intellectuals, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy (2020), who writes that we should understand the cultural change that has taken place in 2020 in terms of a collective mental breakdown. That is to say that in the teeth of the pandemic, the majority of the developed world has slipped into a state of mass psychosis.

For Levy, this is what is novel about the coronavirus pandemic. It has shifted our cultural systems—our ways of understanding and making “the world”—in ways that previous deadly epidemics/pandemics failed to achieve. Recalling only the twentieth century’s most deadly outbreaks—the Spanish flu of 1918–19, the Asian flu of 1958, and the Hong Kong flu of 1968—Levy speculates that what is new about the novel coronavirus is that it has spread around the world on the basis of the viral nature of fear and its cultural ability to drive a large proportion of the world’s population toward the edge of madness.

Given that Levy’s book appeared only in July 2020, after many of the contributions we include in this special issue of *Cultural Politics* had themselves been written, it is worth rehearsing his arguments here. This is because Levy provides a model for understanding the extreme cultural effects of the virus that, in turn, enable us to introduce our own concept of viral culture concerning cultural dislocation and attempts at rapid reorganization. In developing his argument about the madness of the virus, Levy imagines ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) suspending its terror campaign in Europe, which has become a risk zone for its fighters, and leads his reader to work through the absurdity of the suicide bomber who no longer considers it safe to blow themselves up in European cities because of the ever-expanding R-number. (The famous R-number or basic reproduction number measures the rate of viral transmission.) This is coronavirus madness, which describes the unreason that has suddenly gripped the globe and thrown a large proportion of the world’s population into a state in which taken-for-granted understandings of life no longer make sense. Although he does not cite them, Levy’s

vision of the corona-viral culture is inspired by Gabriel Tarde (2012) and Gustav Le Bon (2009), who developed ideas of social and cultural contagion and approaches to understanding the unreason of collective behavior. Quite apart from leaving the minority of people it infects struggling to breathe, the coronavirus, as Levy tells us, is a highly contagious “panic virus” that we must come to terms with socially, psychologically, and culturally to right our upended world and think reasonably once again. These are, in his view, the cultural politics of the virus, and it is this conception that we agree with in our conceptualization of viral culture.

But if we can refer to Tarde and Le Bon to understand the contagious nature of the corona-panic-virus, Levy turns to the work of Jacques Lacan (2007) to explain how the virus has wrecked our sense of “normality” and “world.” In this view, the coronavirus is a little piece of “the real,” which in Lacanian psychoanalysis represents life before Oedipal socialization into civilization, the world of culture, and a more or less predictable everyday life, and that has ripped through the symbolic fabric of everything we take for granted and that enables normal life to tick over. According to this thesis, there is no order in the world of viral culture, and everything seems to break down. As W. B. Yeats (2009) wrote in 1919, in the middle of the Spanish flu, “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (39). But how can we respond to this tear in the symbolic order that enables normal life to happen?

In the early days of the pandemic, when we had no idea what was going on, Levy, utilizing Lacan, suggests that “we” were faced with two alternatives—denial or madness. On the one hand, nothing is happening (as US President Donald Trump told himself and everybody else, “the virus

will simply disappear”) or, on the other hand, we’re facing the end of the world. The third alternative, which is that we respond to the emergence of the real (the virus) in such a way that enables some kind of normality to return, takes time, and this is what Levy suggests we need to reach for in our handling of the coronavirus. Of course, such cultural reorganization, such as normalization, or what we now speak about in terms of “the new normal” (Cubitt, this issue), is not easy to achieve because the leaders of many Western democracies have been infected by their own panic virus, which, Levy tells us, takes the form of a fear of a “corona Nuremberg.” In the grip of this fear, the fear that they might eventually find themselves in “the dock” for a failure to act and suppress the virus, our leaders have turned to strategies familiar to the reader of Michel Foucault (2006) and transformed society into a disciplinary space where the individual is an object of control and surveillance.

This is not to say that Levy believes that the biological virus is the invention of some deep-state conspiracy to enable power to extend its reach over the population, but, rather, that the cultural response to the coronavirus—the virus of fear—has resulted in a panicked overreaction that threatens to destroy the structures of society that enable normal human life to happen. Thus the result of the cultural virus might, in Levy’s view, end up being much worse than the impact of the biological virus. But how can we know this? How can we diagnose the symptoms of the cultural panic virus?

Turning to Foucault’s (2006) work, Levy speculates that the spread of the biological virus has resulted in the massive expansion of medical power, the medical gaze, and the disciplinary reach of the medico-techno-scientific state. This is not

to be “down” on real science, because Levy notes that the uncertainty caused by the biological virus, what we have been calling the panic virus, has led to the emergence of a theological faith in medicine and techno-science to solve all problems that outstrips what real science is capable of delivering. As any reader of Karl Popper (2002) knows, the point of science is that every finding, every truth, is provisional and that there is no certainty. There is no final once-and-for-all answer because the point of science is that it relies on the principle of falsifiability.

The kind of medico-techno-science that has emerged center stage in the pandemic is, therefore, a fantasy science, or perhaps a Heideggerian (2013) nightmare, in which it is possible to know all of the answers and eliminate the uncertainty, anxiety, and doubt that the biological virus has stirred up once and for all (Armitage, this issue). In this respect, Levy’s Foucauldian critique of the response to the pandemic rests on the idea that a medico-techno-scientific state has emerged. It is this state that is trying to solve the problem of the biological virus, by developing vaccines, therapeutic techniques, and social strategies for preventing the transmission of disease, but also offers a sense of certainty to respond to the contagious nature of the cultural panic virus. Moreover, it is the rise of this version of medico-techno-science that Levy regards as a deeply problematic symptom of the spread of the panic virus.

While it may ease people’s anxiety to follow “scientific” advice and remain locked away until the end of days, Levy explains that this approach to absolute certainty—to the certainty that “I will not catch coronavirus”—recalls the obsession with hygiene and hygienics that characterized the early twentieth century and led to

the emergence of political forms that were intolerant to otherness. Supporting this argument, Levy turns to Plato's *Statesman* (1995) and his Socratic debate about the suitability of the physician to lead the city. The dialogue recognizes that there is merit in the idea of the medicalized city because there is a clear connection between maintaining the health of the animal body of the citizen and maintaining the health of the civic body. But the problem, which Socrates recognizes, is that leading the city is not about making decisions on the basis of binary choices between health and disease. That is to say that complete quarantine, and sealing the city off from the outside world, is not a viable strategy. This is because politics is the art of managing uncertainty and striking a balance between this and that position under the ever-changing conditions of the real world. Though the leader committed to hygienics would close the city off and follow the strategy Foucault (2006) sets out in his description of "the great confinement," the true political leader must weigh risk and find the middle ground between freedom and control. This is what reason means.

Whereas the true political leader understands the need for reason, moderation, and balance, the cultural politics of the coronavirus has been marked by madness and extremism. US President Donald J. Trump and Brazil's President Jair M. Bolsonaro, for example, have sought to ignore the virus and deny its existence (Kellner, this issue). While this is, in itself, a kind of madness, Levy suggests that it is no worse than the other extreme, in which "magical thinking" suggests that the virus is on a mission to teach humanity the error of its ways. According to this logic, the coronavirus, the king virus by virtue of its crown of spikes, is imagined to

be representative of the Hegelian cunning of nature, sent to restore order to a world out of balance. However, as Levy explains, this is to project meaning onto the virus itself, onto the tiny microscopic packet of RNA (ribonucleic acid), which does not even possess a life of its own, and to transform it into a kind of punishment from God meant to send humanity in a new direction. From the point of view of this providential thinking, the virus is an educator, teaching us about the need to live a more eco-friendly existence. And while there are no doubt lessons to be learned from the nightmarish situation brought about by the coronavirus, the key point is that we must not let theology distract from the political situation of the present. We must, therefore, understand the culture of the virus politically, and this is why endless lockdown and endless confinement is not an option. One cannot hide away forever.

On the subject of confinement, Levy is particularly scathing of those who have professed to have enjoyed lockdown and the opportunity to "find themselves" in isolation. Citing Blaise Pascal—"All of man's misfortune come from one thing, which is not knowing how to sit quietly in a room" (2020: 39)—he reflects that the philosopher's point was not that we should learn to enjoy ourselves and escape from the world into a state of smug self-indulgence, but, rather, that we must learn to challenge ourselves, to reflect on the nothingness that resides at the very heart of existence, and come to terms with this profound uncertainty. Rather than slumber in confinement, Pascal's challenge suggests the need to accept the anxiety that emerges from a recognition of the void of being, and learn to live with the self that is, in his view, "hateful" precisely because it is never certain, never satisfied, never complete. Even though viral culture

has tended to reinforce the Sartrean (1989) idea that “Hell is other people,” because the other is always potentially contagious and in this respect has fractured “our” socio-symbolic systems by demanding that we keep our distance, Levy’s Pascalian challenge is to see that the self is hellish when it is closed in on its self and refuses to recognize the outside. Against the Kafkaesque (2017) universe of the burrow or bunker, which sees the paranoid self seek to hide away from the world, Levy suggests that now, more than ever before, we must follow Edmund Husserl (2012), who recognized that the self is intentionality, and Emmanuel Levinas (2005), who suggested that the self must be other-centered, and understand the cultural politics of the new world.

Although we are presently feeling vulnerable, this has, in fact, always been the case. This is what it means to be human. Ever since Plato (2003) wrote his *Apology*, and Socrates celebrated his escape from the unreason of his fleshy prison, we have always known that the body is a hellish container that makes us vulnerable and prevents us from ever repeating the sky-scraping achievements of the Gods. Even though viral culture has tended to derealize the death of the body in numbers, curves, and other abstract measures (Sampson and Parikka, this issue), and “the new shut-ins” have been able to escape from the embodied world by taking off into cyberspace, Levy reminds his reader that “burrowing” condemns us to a kind of “bare life,” what he calls “life terrified of itself,” in which everything revolves around the basic need to survive. Specifically, this means that everything else disappears when we hide away in the name of the demand to keep breathing at all costs. But while this may satisfy the criteria for life in the medico-techno-scientific sense, this is

not life in the way that the great philosophers understood it. In this understanding, which we might take from Nietzsche’s (1993) work on Greek tragedy, life resides in going outside, pushing boundaries, and taking risks. In this tragic understanding of life, we are great precisely because of, not despite, the fact that we are vulnerable, and certainty is an impossible goal.

Opposing this tragic vision of life, in which we have to take a chance on the outside and political engagement with the world, Levy turns to Alexandre Kojève’s (1980) vision of the end of history. Although Francis Fukuyama (1992) developed a different reading of Hegel, explaining that American-led globalization represented the end of significant change, Levy suggests that perhaps viral culture is the true end of history in respect of the way it has led to the “animalisation of humanity,” reducing us to domesticated creatures unable to live outside a carefully controlled environment. Despite the fact that this may be safe, and ensure that we keep breathing, it is less than human and opens up a space for the emergence of new forms of totalitarianism. In this regard, Levy points out that the problem with keeping our distance is that it shuts down politics and allows power to ride roughshod over the world where we are free to make our own decisions. Given our disconnection, given our distance from the other, it may appear that “nothing is happening,” but Levy reminds us that this is a fantasy based on a very limited, myopic, view of the world defined by confinement and the biopolitics of security and hygiene. If this is one side of viral culture, Levy challenges us to think politically, to engage with the world that keeps turning, and to step outside our burrows.

In taking up Levy’s challenge to dwell on the coronavirus and not retreat into

our burrows, this special issue of *Cultural Politics* seeks to engage with viral culture politically. We know that the coronavirus does indeed have wide-ranging cultural and political consequences, and therefore raises questions about the imminent shaping of cultural politics. But are the sorts of visions evoked by the term *viral culture* too awful to be true concerning COVID-19? Naturally, countless people have good reason to be fearful of the effects of the new normal or abnormal. The world of technoscience, which uses electron microscopes to “see” the frequently deadly virus, remakes our concept of the image and recreates cultural and political theory anew: similarly, our ideas of reality, the human spirit, and political ideologies from capitalism to communism are being reshaped along with our notions of freedom and the other. In the company of Levy and many of our contributors, we worry about the break with the recent past as viral culture takes command. But it is perhaps an error to leap from the idea of specific cultural and political harm to the supposition that all the effects of the coronavirus are equally damaging to people.

Building on the insights of Levy and other commentators, we refer to two widespread convictions about the cultural and political influence of the coronavirus: first, a complete cultural and political transformation is forecast (viral culture has arrived and is here to stay); and second, this transformation is a bad and regressive movement. What is wrong with such convictions? Together with many of our contributors, we argue, in diverse ways, that one of the chief problems with these assumptions is that they rely on a one-way relationship between the cultural and the political and the coronavirus itself. In other words, these readings suggest that the coronavirus is in some way external to

culture and politics and is imposing itself on them. An alternative interpretation, which our contributors exemplify throughout the special issue, is that the cultural, the political, and the viral cannot be disconnected in this way. This is precisely what Levy suggests—the new coronavirus is as much a cultural and political agent as culture and politics are viral agents. There is a continuous interaction between the viral, the cultural, and the political.

But the coronavirus-shaped future is erroneous because it fails to take account of two issues. First, while obviously a virus that infects all types of human life forms, the coronavirus also has cultural and political roots (in militarized research institutes specializing in biological threats, biowarfare, bioweapons, and bioterrorism, for example). Such origins are rarely revealed unless there is a viral outbreak of some kind, but they have directed the development not only of vaccines against viruses for civilian use but also viruses for military use against enemies who do not have a vaccine. Second, the cultural and political protocols introduced to stem the spread of the new coronavirus are not being universally accepted and assimilated submissively. Some consumers are declining to wear face masks when purchasing goods in the era of the coronavirus (conflicts over wearing face masks in supermarkets are an example); some supermarket employees oppose the installation of new anticoronavirus personal protection equipment (PPE) (think of numerous supermarket checkout workers face masked for up to eight hours a day). At the same time, however, we do not wish to substitute viral determinism with cultural and political determinism. The coronavirus has countless unexpected cultural and political outcomes and must be regarded as a comparatively independent issue within some

specific circumstances. The viral convergence between submicroscopic infectious agents and their replication inside the living cells of organisms does have cultural and political consequences that are, as yet, not understood (instances in this special issue include defending ourselves from the coronavirus, the successes and failures of lockdown strategies, and the eventual fate of authoritarian populist political leaders from Trump and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to Bolsonaro).

To predict the appearance of a new type of culture is perhaps to overstate the uniqueness of the political aftereffects of the coronavirus and possibly to overlook customary issues and processes—for instance the in-built racial, sexual, and economic inequalities of the neoliberal market system—which will continue to be important (Morley, this issue). Simultaneously, we do wish to emphasize that many of the cultural and political changes connected to the coronavirus are extensive and do raise questions for cultural and political theory. Famous modern cultural and political thinkers, such as Martin Heidegger ([1927] 1962), took as their foundation the obvious transformations of being and time in the Western world, wherein human existence and capitalist techno-science played dominant roles. Submicroscopic infectious agents that replicate only inside the living cells of an organism are currently affecting the very organization of our existence, while concurrently “helping” change features of capitalist techno-science, so deep-rooted cultural concepts and political theories must be reassessed. The part played by states such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, China, and Singapore is also significant (and in ways undervalued by modern cultural and political thought), and they too are implicated in the present processing

of submicroscopic infectious agents, their replication, and the everyday lives of billions of people around the globe (Tan, this issue; Der Derian and Gara, this issue).

It is also presumed that the new variety of cultural politics brought about by the coronavirus is largely undesirable. This kind of “pessimism of the intellect” (Gramsci 1973: 158–59) (not unknown in the history of viruses, such as the deadly Spanish flu pandemic of 1918–20) is not wholly justified, or so we and our contributors argue. Let us also state that the alternative to such pessimism is not merely “optimism of the will” (158–59) or providential thinking of the variety Levy (2020) critiques concerning the madness of the virus. Indeed, such pessimism (and on the contrary blind optimism) about the cultural and political effects of the new coronavirus can be a distraction from reasoned political debate. To be exact, this approach functions to avoid questions about the ways that the coronavirus has developed (Through research labs in Wuhan? Through wet markets? Through bats?) and been introduced to the world (through China?). In other words, the critical cultural questions concerning our entry into viral culture and how we should live in the new viral world are indivisible from the political, ethical, and normative questions regarding what, in contemporary culture, counts as an undesirable or a desirable virus.

In what follows, then, the critical and the normative tasks are considered related, though different and discernible. It is not feasible to separate cultural analysis from frequently implied beliefs about the ideal or utopian polity. So we, and our contributors, support understandings from actor-network theory and cultural studies, critical theory, posthumanism, cultural Marxism, media archaeology, phenomenology, poststructuralism, cyborg studies,

quantum theory, psychoanalysis, and literature, which, in diverse ways, link cultural analysis, politics, and ethics, though none of our contributors ally themselves wholeheartedly with one tradition. In considering and selecting between theories, they are directed by empirical limitation and by beliefs rooted in various traditions of cultural and political thought. This, for us, and for our contributors, is how the analysis of the cultural and the normative aspects of the political combine. At specific points this is especially significant. Rather than our contributors overemphasizing them later, we underline them now.

First, the fact that we are active, reflexive beings must be integrated within any account of our patterns of human association. This is forgotten in explanations where the coronavirus seemingly has the ability to influence culture and politics in some sovereign manner and in analyses of the cultural politics of the new coronavirus that disregard the role of our reactions and capacity for resistance. Though not repudiating how the cultural-, political-, and coronavirus-induced arrangements constrain our actions, we and our contributors refuse all modes of determinism wherein all states of affairs, human cultural events, political acts, and decisions are the inevitable consequence of antecedent states of affairs. Against this situation, we and our contributors want to emphasize the possibility of political analysis and political action in the world of viral culture.

Second, our actions do not happen in a normless void. We are valuing beings, and any effort to elucidate cultural relationships and political processes entails evaluation. If this normative aspect is taken sincerely, then, for instance, deep pessimism concerning the defeat of the coronavirus and wild optimism relating to its providential impact are revealed as shallow,

and concepts such as “the imperative of responsibility” (Jonas 1984) become pertinent. Cultural examination steered by a commitment to the imperative of responsibility concerning the coronavirus must then play a productive role within political decisions in the laboratories of technoscience, nuclear, and military institutions; increasingly ecologically ravaged communities; and genetic engineering.

Third, although it is true that many of the coronavirus’s significant features are initially sensed in the human body, this does not mean that the signs about the relation of the coronavirus to culture are revealed in the sphere of the human body. For we are cultural beings, involved in a search for political sense making. Thus, for example, we make no apology for introducing the political category of “authoritarian populism” (Kellner 2021, this issue) to signify a misdirected belief in the power of the “big man,” of Trump, Johnson, and Bolsonaro, to provide the meaning of the coronavirus pandemic or to resolve our existential condition in the era of COVID-19.

We are conscious that others might share some of our viewpoints, but from another perspective. We are not claiming that they are personal to us. Stating them might also help readers understand how the contributors to this special issue may be differentiated from other cultural and political theorists who cover similar ground. The theory of the “state of exception” developed by Giorgio Agamben (2020), for example, although arguing the point that the coronavirus epidemic has to a certain extent been “invented,” integrates “frenetic” cultural and “irrational” political values and finishes on a disturbing note: “the state of fear,” in collusion with our co-opted individual consciences, increases and strengthens its grip in a



culture predicated on collective panic, the politics of unfreedom, and the desire for safety. In our understanding and that of our contributors (Goh, this issue), Agamben's description of the state of exception puts too little weight on other issues, for example the significant difference between COVID-19 and the common flu, and on the legal and biopolitical critique that was demonstrated in his earlier work contained in *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 1995) and which is still pertinent today. Following Levy's (2020) reading of the virus, the point is not that the coronavirus is insignificant, or a "little flu," but, rather, that we must learn to live—where living means living a "human life"—with the virus and come to terms with the ways in which this means our world will change.

The idea that a viral culture has appeared does raise vital questions. In tandem, it invites critique. By examining some of what has been exposed hitherto about the cultural influences of the new coronavirus and linking this with political theory we have tried to put a focus on those vital questions. Through critique, we and our contributors focus attention on three broad themes. First, the coronavirus is culturally and politically important. But is the coronavirus important for the reasons cultural and political theorists such as Levy and Agamben give? The new coronavirus is playing a pivotal role in the rearrangement of the political across all cultures. But do we comprehend the coronavirus's actual contribution to cultural and political transformation? Second, appraising our own thesis concerning viral culture inescapably entails normative and self-reflexive questions and ethical choices. Has this aspect been hidden in a world where even cultural and political discourse is now governed by the coronavirus? Finally, if the concept of viral culture also articulates political ambitions,

is it best understood as a form of "utopian realism" (Featherstone, this issue) or as a communist or capitalist cover-up? Or does it comprise vestiges of each?

In short, the aim of this special issue of *Cultural Politics* is to critically unpack and unfold the cultural politics of the coronavirus. If medicalization represents one, and perhaps the dominant, strain of viral culture, the objective of this issue is to try to look beyond the apparently postpolitical world of hygienics, where one is either safe and secure behind closed doors, or exposed, contaminated, and contagious, in the name of complicating understandings of how the coronavirus has impacted the world.

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