

Confronting the rise of authoritarianism during the COVID-19 pandemic should be a priority for critical geographers and social scientists

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Abstract: The aim¹ of this paper is to encourage critical geographers and social scientists to take a stronger, more explicit, and more intellectually rigorous anti-authoritarian stance against the problematic public response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so effectively, what is urgently needed is to contribute to the emerging body of *academic research* documenting the devastating political economy of lockdowns and other non-pharmaceutical interventions, and arguing for a more proportionate pandemic response. This necessitates a genuinely critical approach that (a) avoids the tunnel vision of minimizing only one specific form of harm (COVID-19 deaths and illnesses) and (b) cultivates instead a more encompassing sense of solidarity, grounded in the careful documenting of the multiple, long-term, harms caused by that tunnel vision.

Key words: COVID-19; authoritarianism; geographical political economy; critical social science; fear; Academic Left.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to encourage critical geographers and social scientists to take a stronger, more explicit anti-authoritarian stance against the problematic public response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To be sure, there have already been published academic debates concerning geographers' reaction to the pandemic, with special issues dedicated to the topic in *Dialogues in Human Geography* (vol. 10, issue 2; see Rose-Redwood et al., 2020, for an overview), *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* (vol. 111, issue 3), and *Cartographica* (vol. 56, issue 1). While these collections show the breadth of knowledge geographers can contribute to an assessment of the pandemic response, we worry that they are not critical enough of the underlying premises of government restrictions. More specifically, these debates have revolved around the fact that (a) governments haven't done enough to protect the population from the virus; (b) this limited protection has operated alongside pre-existing axes of social difference so as to amplify earlier forms of exclusion and marginalisation; and (c) the pandemic should be appraised geographically and globally, so as to avoid "territorial traps" pertaining to "the governance of international travel and migration, inter-state coordination, and territorial thinking" (Wang et al., 2020: 154). Whereas these are important matters, we argue that one of the most urgent preoccupations for critical geographers should be unmasking and opposing the rise of authoritarianism and the violation of basic human rights occasioned by the governments' response to COVID-19 (cf. Alizada et al., 2021). Indeed, even though there is a rapidly growing peer-reviewed literature on the various aspects of the pandemic, we still notice that a far too small portion of it focuses on the primary issue of concern to us: the prospect of a permanent "state of emergency" or new authoritarian paradigm of biosecurity, and the failure of the Academic Left to confront it in a systematic, principled manner.

In 1842, Karl Marx asked, rhetorically: "Is not death more desirable than life that is a mere preventive measure against death? Does not life involve also free movement?" (Marx, 1842: 1). Critical geographers and the Academic Left, more generally, have traditionally been preoccupied with this theme, with explicit anti-authoritarian discourse associated with the geographies of domination/resistance (see Hughes, 2020, for a recent review), the geographical critique of technologically-enabled state surveillance (e.g. Kitchin, 2020; Swanlund

and Schuurman, 2019), anarchist geography (Ferretti, 2017; Springer, 2014), Foucauldian geographies (Cadman, 2010; Foucault, 2014; Philo, 2012; Wang and Yungang, 2017; cf. Shullenberger, 2021), critical geographies of police and policing (see Bloch, 2021, for a recent review), the carceral state (Cassidy, 2019; Moran et al., 2018), feminist theorizing of bodily autonomy (see Chakravarty et al., 2020, for a recent review) and of “science” as ideology (Haraway, 1988; Simandan, 2019), and strands of human geography inspired by the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2021; Gregory, 2006; Minca, 2006). In the next section, we focus in more detail on Agamben’s writings on the pandemic and the Academic Left’s reaction to them, as a prelude to discussing, in the third section, the politics of dissent in public discourse against the pandemic response. The fourth section explores a number of plausible causal linkages that may help explain how we got here, in the hope that they will spearhead further critical work on these themes. We conclude the paper by highlighting four such themes especially worthy of a more concerted research effort.

Biosecurity and the politics of fear

Agamben’s scholarship is especially pertinent to our concern, because early in the pandemic he took a strong stand about the excessive governmental response in general, and the dangers of invoking states of emergency in times of peace, in particular. He noted repeatedly that (a) the state of emergency is the mechanism by which democracies become totalitarian societies and (b) we are witnessing the rise of a new paradigm of biosecurity replacing the preoccupation with terrorism after 9/11 (Agamben, 2020, 1):

At issue is nothing less than the creation of a sort of “health terror” as an instrument for governing what are called “worst case scenarios.”...the apparatus being suggested was articulated in three points: 1) the construction, on the basis of a possible risk, of a fictitious scenario in which data are presented in such a way as to promote behaviors that allow for governing an extreme situation; 2) the adoption of the logic of the worst as a regime of political rationality; 3) the total organization of the body of citizens in a way that strengthens maximum adherence to institutions of government, producing a sort of superlative good citizenship in which imposed obligations are presented as evidence of altruism and the citizen no longer has a right to health (health safety) but becomes juridically obliged to health (biosecurity)...It is evident that, apart from the emergency situation, linked to a certain virus that may in the future be replaced by another, at issue is the design of a paradigm of governance whose efficacy will exceed that of all forms of government known thus far in the political history of the West...Thus it was possible to see the

paradox of organizations of the left, traditionally in the habit of claiming rights and denouncing violations of the constitution, accepting limitations on liberty made by ministerial decree devoid of any legal basis and which even fascism couldn't dream of imposing.

We have found strange and intellectually inconsistent that despite Agamben's wide followership in critical geographical circles before the pandemic, few if any of our colleagues have explicitly endorsed or even engaged with his anti-authoritarian arguments regarding the management of the pandemic and the associated emergence of a new, deeply problematic, paradigm of biosecurity (cf. Manson, 2020). A distinct possibility is that of self-censorship. As one of our reviewers noted, "anecdotally, there are lots of examples of individuals on the Academic Left being absolutely fed-up with the public health restrictions...But these private, casual conversations may not make it to written work, to Twitter, or to faculty meetings, for fear of being seen as reactionary". On social media, Agamben's views have been dismissed as "the ramblings of a 77-year old man" out-of-touch with the presumed severity of COVID-19 (Christaens, 2020; see also Žižek, 2020), but our reading of recent, peer-reviewed studies (e.g. Brown, 2020; Gaffney, 2021; Ioannidis, 2021; Olabi et al., 2021; O'Driscoll et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021; Pormohammad et al., 2020) leads us to agree with Agamben that there is a disturbing lack of proportionality between government responses to the pandemic and the actual lethality of the virus (see also Bratton, 2021; Mitropoulos, 2021; and Sotiris, 2020, for less dismissive and more thoughtful engagements with his views on the pandemic). Instead, the public health measures seem to be driven by (and through) fear, peer pressure, and imitation of one's neighbours (Bagus et al., 2021; Joffe, 2021; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020; Sebhatu et al., 2020; Vighi, 2020; see also Clarke and Chess, 2008, for an incisive analysis of what happens when elites panic).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses how instilling fear and suspicion among the population opens a direct path towards tyranny, which, according to her reading of Montesquieu, was not simply "one form of government among others but contradicted the essential human condition of plurality, the acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization" (1998: 202). That the deliberate spreading of fear has been a key governmental maneuver for increasing population compliance should have been an early

red flag for critical geographers and social scientists familiar with the nefarious politics of this emotion, as exposed by luminaries such as Sarah Ahmed (2014), Hannah Arendt (1998, 2017), Zygmunt Bauman (2006), and Martha Nussbaum (2016, 2018; see also Dodsworth, 2021; Ferguson, 2021; Hier, 2011; Higgs, 2006; Lopes et al., 2020; Robin, 2004; and Tomes, 2000). The striking loss of a balance between the competing values of safety and freedom during the pandemic has been reflected in the urge to enact and comply with sweeping restrictions, between and within countries, through the regional and local levels, and all the way to daily human interactions. As Caduff (2020, 14) pointed out:

Ironically, these extremely restrictive lockdowns were sometimes demanded by people eager to criticize the authoritarianism of the Chinese state. Across the world, the pandemic unleashed authoritarian longings in democratic societies, allowing governments to seize the opportunity, create states of exception and push political agendas. Commentators have presented the pandemic as a chance for the West to learn authoritarianism from the East. This pandemic risks teaching people to love power and call for its meticulous application.

We emphasize that our argument should not be misconstrued as an “either-or” callous or reckless preference for sacrificing safety for the sake of freedom (see also Angeli et al., 2021, for an analysis of conflicting values in pandemic policy). We are decrying the lack of a balancing act between these two important Leftist values (for theories of collective wisdom focused on the importance of balancing competing values, see Simandan, 2011, and Sternberg, 1998). As one of our reviewers pointed out, critical geographers should pay attention to the temporal dimension of this unprecedented loss of balance between safety and freedom, distinguishing between “current extreme government, and the possibility of persistence of some interventions (such as geosurveillance) after the pandemic”. We note, in this context, how the initial time-bound goal “two weeks to flatten the curve” has morphed into two years and going. As Buck et al. (2020: 3) have put it, “stopgap measures to buy time for longer-term action carry the particular risk that the initial objective is forgotten, and eventually maintaining the stopgap becomes the goal”. In the final section of our paper, we return to this issue for a broader reflection on the misuse of uncertainty, “out of an abundance of caution”, as pretext for authoritarian rule.

Dissent in public discourse

Until recently, dissenting opinions on the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic response were published primarily in the grey literature and on social media, as in the case of Agamben's initial warnings. For example, geographer Mike Hulme's (2020) "Do Not Reduce the Future to Covid-19" should appeal to any scholar's understanding that complex systems present wicked problems that do not have simple solutions. Similarly, geographer Danny Dorling has written "Coronavirus: Is the cure worse than the disease? The most divisive question of 2020" (Dorling, 2020), arguing that "unless you are sure that a particular measure for locking down will do more good than harm, in the round, you should not do it" and urging all stakeholders to "begin to see opposing scientific views and opinions as a gift and an opportunity to be sceptical and learn, rather than as a 'rival camp'".

Academic philosophers have written "Welcome to Covidworld" (Kidd and Ratcliffe, 2020; see also Lewis and Murphy, 2020), emphasizing the widespread "failure to consider things in their wider context", and noting that "Many of those who would more usually insist on examining alternative possibilities or challenge the party line now fall strangely silent", and that "questions about the adequacy of evidence are often reinterpreted in moral terms and dismissed as irresponsible acts of 'covidiocty'." We have personally made similar observations and are alert to the possibility that the Western world may be on its way to a dystopian "society of control" (Deleuze, 2017) or to a "fascistoid-hysterical hygiene state" (Heinig, 2020; cf. Di Cesare, 2021, and Weber, 2020), as ecclesiastical law professor Hans Michael Heinig cautioned as early as March 2020 (see also Lewis and Schuklenk, 2021, for an alarming analysis of how the management of the pandemic has undone decades of progress in the field of bioethics and returned us to the elitism of "the doctor knows best" philosophy).

However, the non-peer reviewed status of these otherwise valuable contributions has made them vulnerable to quickly being dismissed as "fringe" or "non-scientific". We therefore encourage critical geographers and social scientists to go beyond relying on social media to take a more formal and rigorous stand against the dangers of authoritarianism in the context of the pandemic response. To be sure, publishing peer-reviewed research does not guarantee that it won't be dismissed or ignored in public discourse, nor will it shelter its authors from the risk of being doxed or harassed on social media. Despite our sometimes too passionate differences of opinion

about the pandemic, we progressive scholars need to stand united in our defense of academic freedom because it alone makes possible those differences. As Buck et al. (2020: 3) have cautioned, “COVID-19 has been a stress test for the interactions between science, media, and politics...and it has revealed complex and potentially harmful dynamics in the links between these spheres” (see also Bhopal and Munro, 2021; Clarke, 2021; Crawford, 2021; and Torjesen, 2021). Engaging rather than dismissing different opinions is essential to a thorough scientific approach and is a core distinction between science and faith (Anderson, 2021; Lohse and Bschor, 2020; Quinn et al., 2021; Rescher, 2018). It is especially important for geographers and social scientists to question the restrictive lockdown measures as “necessary” and therefore as something to be accepted at face value rather than critically assessed. Such an approach is extremely problematic because, as Agamben reminds us, the concept of necessity is entirely subjective and “the only circumstances that are necessary and objective are those that are declared to be so” (2005: 30).

The type of interventions we have in mind is superbly illustrated by geographer Rob Kitchin’s scholarly paper “*Civil liberties or public health, or civil liberties and public health? Using surveillance technologies to tackle the spread of COVID-19*” (Kitchin, 2020). To reiterate, what is urgently needed is to contribute to the emerging body of *academic research* documenting the devastating political economy of lockdowns and other non-pharmaceutical interventions (e.g. Bavli et al., 2020; Benanav, 2020; Blankenburg et al., 2021; Broadbent et al., 2020; Buonsenso et al., 2020; Bzdok and Dunbar, 2020; Caduff, 2020; Chanchlani et al., 2020; Christakis et al., 2020; Deoni et al., 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Gibson and Olivia, 2020; Greco et al., 2020; Greitens, 2020; Greitens and Gewirtz, 2020; Gulland, 2020; Hand and Maciejewski, 2021; Headey et al., 2020; Hsu and Henke, 2021; Huang et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2021; Kisielinski et al., 2021; Lange and Pickett-Depaolis, 2020; Maringe et al., 2020; McIntyre and Lee, 2020; Monaghan, 2020; Moore et al., 2021; Ong et al., 2020; Pai, 2020; Pellicano et al., 2021; Pietrabissa and Simpson, 2020; Prasad, 2020; Preston, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Schippers, 2020; Sidpra et al., 2021; Thomson and Ip, 2020; Turcotte-Tremblay et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2021). As Caduff (2020: 17) has put it, “the time to suppress the costs of suppression and cast the consequences of interventions as an externality to model-based policy is over”.

We believe that in these dangerous times in order to remain critical we need to practice wisdom, that is, to develop a sense of perspective and proportionality (Allen, 2021; Altman, 2020; Bassetti et al., 2020; Camera and Gioffré, 2021; Director and Freiman, 2021; Finlay et al., 2021; Jones, 2020; Kampf and Kulldorff, 2021; Klement, 2020; Lohse and Bschor, 2020; Maor et al., 2020; Mykhalovskiy et al., 2020; Rinner, 2021; Simandan, 2011, 2020). A wise stance necessitates an appraisal of this particular pandemic in the context of how we have managed other recent pandemics, without rushed recourse to governing by decrees and mandating non-pharmaceutical interventions with very equivocal and often contradictory scientific evidence behind them (e.g. Agrawal et al., 2021; Bendavid et al., 2021; Berry et al., 2021; Bjørnskov, 2021; Boretti, 2020; Brauner et al., 2021; Bundgaard et al., 2021; Camporesi, 2020; Chin et al., 2021; De Laroche Lambert et al., 2020; Farsalinos et al., 2021; Gómez-Ochoa and Muka, 2021; Guerra and Guerra, 2021; Herby, 2021; Jefferson et al., 2020; Lansiaux et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2020; Meunier, 2020; Miles et al., 2020; Oster et al., 2021; Raynaud et al., 2021; Robinson, 2021; Savaris et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020; Wieland, 2020a-b; Williams et al., 2021).

One of our main points is that the often circulated argument that we must temporarily sacrifice civil rights for the sake of safety is much weaker than it first seems because it assumes that non-pharmaceutical interventions have been proven to be effective. Several of the above references (including meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and randomized controlled trials) show non-pharmaceutical interventions to be either minimally effective or ineffective or counterproductive in preventing the spread of the virus. Beyond their direct outcomes in terms of the pandemic, these interventions have also resulted in multiple negative impacts on society at the economic, emotional, and social levels. The totality of available evidence reveals a public health “double whammy” whereby the putative benefits of non-pharmaceutical interventions have been overestimated and their likely costs underestimated. The responses to the pandemic betrayed a lack of structured decision-making that considers multiple streams of evidence, weighs costs against benefits, and respects the established principles of evidence-based medicine (cf. Amin-Chowdhury and Ladhani, 2021; Deana, 2021; Djulbegovic and Guyatt, 2017; Jefferson and Heneghan, 2020). If this is not done, we are left with highly visible, highly ineffectual, and

expensive “security theatre”: “The allure of performative measures potentially includes democratic regimes that may find themselves under pressure to demonstrate doing something” (Buck et al., 2020: 2-3). In response to this situation, progressive scholars should help develop a geographical political economy that (a) avoids the tunnel vision of minimizing only one specific form of harm (COVID-19 deaths and illnesses; see Graso et al., 2021) and (b) cultivates instead a more encompassing sense of solidarity, grounded in the careful documenting of the multiple, long-term, harms caused by that tunnel vision.

How did we end up here?

Political philosopher Donatella di Cesare has noted that during COVID-19 “the heterogeneous spheres of politics and medicine overlap and meld together. One cannot know where right ends and healthcare begins. Political action tends to take on a medical modality, while medical practice becomes politicized” (di Cesare, 2021: 18). How did we end up here? How come that so many people seem to have “somehow convert[ed] their instincts for compassion and solidarity into clamour for a police state?” (Rowe, 2020: 1). How come that self-declared Left-Wing scholars trained to think critically have failed to grapple with the key fact that the “supposedly neutral medical advice that is being continuously pumped out does contain an implicit ideological message about who is responsible for this and what a good person looks like and what is a reasonable burden for a state to impose on its population” (Rowe, 2020: 1). How come that we have forgotten or compartmentalized the multiple threads of anti-authoritarian thinking that have been constitutive of the Leftist ethos in normal times?

Because at the time of this writing (summer of 2021) we are still in the middle of the pandemic, we do not have the benefit of distance and the pretense of a comprehensive explanation. The terms of the debate are quickly shifting as we write, with concerns over the conditions of re-opening, emerging virus variants, mandatory vaccinations and vaccine passports taking center stage, while the earlier preoccupation with non-pharmaceutical interventions recedes to some extent into the background. While acknowledging the situatedness and partiality

of our knowledge claims, what we offer instead are a few causal linkages that may spearhead further critical research that explores the neglected factors of spatial difference and social difference in pandemic (mis)management. To begin with, the escalation of level-headed, rational, concern with the virus into full blown panic and collective hysteria is best conceptualized as a reinforcing feedback loop known as an availability cascade:

...a media story about a risk catches the attention of a segment of the public, which becomes aroused and worried. This emotional reaction becomes a story in itself, prompting additional coverage in the media, which in turn produces greater concern and involvement. The cycle is sometimes sped along deliberately by 'availability entrepreneurs,' individuals or organizations who work to ensure a continuous flow of worrying news. The danger is increasingly exaggerated as the media compete for attention-grabbing headlines. Scientists and others who try to dampen the increasing fear and revulsion attract little attention, most of it hostile; anyone who claims that the danger is overstated is suspected of association with a 'heinous cover-up.' The issue becomes politically important because it is on everyone's mind, and the response of the political system is guided by the intensity of public sentiment. The availability cascade has now reset priorities. Other risks, and other ways that resources could be applied for the public good, all have faded into the background (Kahneman, 2011, 142).

A useful complement to the notion of availability cascades is Joffe's (2021) analysis of groupthink (see also Schippers and Rus, 2021). He observes that the 'initial modeling predictions induced fear and crowd-effects (i.e., groupthink)' (p.2), describing groupthink as 'the tendency for groups to let the desire for harmony and conformity prevail, resulting in dysfunctional decision-making processes and becoming less willing to alter their course of action once they settle on it' (p.4). The nauseating availability in mass media and social media of tragic stories of hospitalization, intensive care treatment, and death, as well as the frequent conflation of important distinctions (e.g. risk of passing by someone who has COVID-19 *versus* risk of actually contracting the virus; dying of COVID-19 *versus* dying with COVID-19; infection fatality ratio *versus* case fatality ratio; harms caused by the pandemic *versus* harms caused by our choice of response to the pandemic; risk of outdoor transmission *versus* risk of indoor transmission, e.g. Bulfone et al., 2021) have created over time a growing gap between actual risk and subjective perception of risk (Spiegelhalter, 2020). To illustrate, even though less than 5% of all people infected with Covid-19 require hospitalization, only 18% of Americans were aware of this small proportion, whereas 35% of them believe erroneously that at least 50% of those infected do require

hospitalization (Rothwell and Desai, 2020). Even though such a gap in public awareness can be seen as a subtle type of misinformation, health authorities and mainstream media have done nothing to correct it, choosing instead to reserve the “misinformation” label for (a) conspiracy theorists and (b) – more problematically – for those daring to highlight academic research at odds with the presumed efficacy of non-pharmaceutical interventions (cf. Bhopal and Munro, 2021; Chomsky and Herman, 1994; Torjesen, 2021). The large gap between actual risk and perceived risk, together with pre-existing inter-individual variability in trait anxiety and risk aversion (cf. Chan et al., 2020), and the echo-chamber dynamics of social media bubbles (cf. Hossain et al., 2020; Walsh, 2020) have generated the interesting phenomenon that for a significant segment of the population it is the re-opening of society and economy that comes across as authoritarian. This safetyist sentiment has often led to outcries on social media and mainstream media against political figures such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in the USA, Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India, or Johnson in the UK.

Reflecting on this inverted view of re-opening decisions as authoritarian, one of our reviewers noted that “authoritarianism needs to be thought about reflexively and not assigned easy / stable moral markers or categories” (see also Koch, 2019, Owen, 2020, and Morgenbesser, 2020). We think it would be useful to have a demographic analysis of intergenerational drift in people’s hierarchy of values, because an empirical finding that newer generations are concerned with safety, health, and longevity much more than earlier generations would help explain why the management of COVID-19 has been so different than the management of other pandemics of the last 100 years, and why the majority of the population has been supportive of it. Cayley (2020) and Murphy (2021) have provided thought-provoking philosophical analyses of some of these issues and the related processes of what they call collective infantilization and sentimentalization. In the same vein, Brunila and Rossi (2018) have appraised the unintended consequences of the growing appeal of the “ethos of vulnerability” in the last few decades. It would also be useful to have an updated critical history of public health thought that would describe the different schools of thought in epidemiology and public health, and their changing degree of influence over time. Has there been a subtle change in these academic fields about what is deemed an acceptable public health response that occurred even before the pandemic started (see also Angeli et

al., 2021; Zylberman, 2013)? In which ways has 9/11 and the subsequent massive funding for biosecurity and the “War on Terror” sowed the seeds for our response to COVID-19 (cf. Caduff, 2015; D’Arcangelis, 2021)? How has the dichotomous worldview “us vs. them” that was popularized by George W. Bush, been reflected in the polarized current discourse and the censorship of anyone with opinions that differ from the mainstream narrative? Going further back in time, has the (presumed) subtle change in the foregoing biomedical fields been influenced by the documented fact that the AIDS pandemic was initially not taken seriously until it became a threat beyond LGBTQ communities (Bardhan, 2001; Heriot and Jamrozik, 2021; Jones, 2020)?

In turn, the collective escalation of fear and feelings of vulnerability has reset people’s attitude to figures of authority and has broadened the boundaries of what is deemed an acceptable exercise of power. This crucial linkage between fear and the situational embrace of authoritarianism has been studied by Frankfurt School socialist thinker Erich Fromm, who noted:

As long as I am obedient to the power of the State, the Church, or public opinion, I feel safe and protected. In fact, it makes little difference what power it is that I am obedient to. It is always an institution, or men (sic), who use force in one form or another and who fraudulently claim omniscience and omnipotence. My obedience makes me part of the power I worship; hence I feel strong. I can make no error, since it decides for me; I cannot be alone, because it watches over me; I cannot commit sin, because it does not let me do so, and even if I do sin, the punishment is only the way of returning to the almighty power (Fromm, 2019, 8-9).

Further factors that pushed people on the Left to abandon its long-record of preoccupation with freedom and personal autonomy have been (a) the discursive appropriation of these values in Right-wing circles and (b) the widespread tendency of mainstream media to “manufacture consent” (Chomsky and Herman, 1994) for the pandemic response by framing all forms of anti-lockdown protest as extreme Right-wing, white supremacist, or worse. This fear of guilt by association has triggered a “purity spiral” (Haynes, 2020) whereby the overt display of concern with freedoms became a telltale sign of the proverbial Trump supporter. In this context, overtly mocking “muh rights” and casting aspersions of selfishness on those not fully complying with what needs to be done to “save grandma” became the best way to exculpate oneself on social media from the suspicion of being a

hidden Trumpist. Radical Marxist scholars Lange and Pickett-Depaolis (2020, 147-149) have not minced words to describe the bizarre corner in which the Left has painted itself as a result of this virtue signalling game:

The left's newly discovered love for state authority and organs enforcing these measures, a love in the name of the 'vulnerable', precisely reflects a radical indifference towards the precariat and 'underclass'. The unfortunate debate over "life" vs. "the economy" reveals this... The outrage at individuals transgressing social distancing measures - "you want people to die!" – ironically expresses this disinterestedness in the actual lives of people, paralleled by the indifference towards actual social change for the stratum of society that suffers most under the class politics of lockdown. As though they lived in an alternate reality, for the liberal, and sometimes the radical left, the lockdown became the site of struggle of a science-guided paternal state against 'selfish people' enjoying themselves in outside spaces like parks and beaches. In the name of the 'vulnerable', it absorbed an authoritarian *Kulturkampf* on its own terms, that at best disregarded the ramification of total economic shutdown for the poorest, and at worst whipped up a classist resentment against ordinary, often working, individuals to whom the often-used label 'vulnerable' mysteriously never applies. In the spring of 2020, in short, the authoritarian personality found a safe harbour in the left middle class.

The appropriation of freedom and personal autonomy in Right-wing circles is an ideological move that critical geographers and progressive scholars should scrutinize and unmask more systematically because these values have always been constitutive of the Leftist ethos and cannot be simply abandoned (or gifted) to the "rival" political camp. In a remarkably prescient analysis of the response to the MERS pandemic in South Korea, critical geographers Lim and Sziarto (2020, 60) highlighted the political urgency of documenting "infectious disease mismanagement as a way of understanding the mixture of neoliberal and illiberal governance in public health". Their work provides a useful empirical template for exploring the COVID-19 pandemic, given that, as Šumonja (2021, 215) cautioned, "rather than waning in the face of the coronavirus crisis, neoliberal states around the world are using the ongoing 'war against the virus' to strengthen their right-hand grip on the conditions of the working classes". Indeed, we worry that the current pandemic may have ushered in a new, authoritarian phase in the evolution of neoliberal praxis, which is not as counterintuitive as it first seems (see also Koch, 2019; Luger, 2020a-b; and Sparke, 2020, for critical geographical approaches to the nexus of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism). As Biebricher (2020, 1) has argued, "neoliberalism and authoritarianism are not intrinsically tied to each other, but even less are they inherently opposed to one another; an amalgam of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' thus seems far from impossible and may very well become the

dominant shape of neoliberalism to come”. Modern history teaches us that there is a marked asymmetry between the ease and speed of losing freedoms and human rights and the effort and long delays involved in earning them back (Mayer, 2017).

Final thoughts and outlook

We would like to end this paper by highlighting four themes brought up by our analysis but requiring further research and scholarship in critical geography and beyond.

First of all, earlier in our argument we decried the lack of systematic cost-benefit analysis in the governance of the pandemic, but we are just as much concerned with the impossible to quantify “hidden costs” of non-pharmaceutical interventions. What is the impact on our collective *psyche* of reducing one another to potential vectors of disease and repeatedly engaging in the practice of social distancing (cf. Furedi, 2020; Simandan, 2016)? Similarly, mask mandates have been pushed on the unwilling with the exhortation that “it is the least that we can do”, that they are cost-effective, and that they constitute a mere “minor inconvenience” (cf. Kisielinski et al., 2021). Leaving aside the very mixed evidence regarding their (in)effectiveness (e.g. Bundgaard et al., 2021; Gómez-Ochoa and Muka, 2021; Jefferson et al., 2020; Schauer et al., 2021), as well as the rampant ableism of these exhortations (Martin et al., 2020; Saint and Moscovitch, 2021), we cannot help but wonder about their hard to measure psychological and political costs (Kowalik, 2021; Shapiro and Boudier, 2021; Strongman, 2021). As Crawford (2021: 1) has put it, “by the nakedness of our faces we encounter one another as individuals, and in doing so we experience fleeting moments of grace and trust. To hide our faces behind masks is to withdraw this invitation. This has to be politically significant”. Furthermore, an estimated 1.5 billion disposable masks found their way into the oceans in 2020 alone (Phelps Bondaroff and Cooke, 2021), adding to the harmful impact of plastic pollution on the earth’s marine ecosystems. Appraising the environmental along with social and economic costs (and possible benefits) of non-pharmaceutical interventions presents an enormous research challenge (see also Turcotte-Tremblay et al., 2021).

Second, critical phenomenologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and human geographers need to carry out research documenting the relationship between values, moral(izing) rhetoric, and the emergence of dangerous forms of technologically-enhanced tribalism and dehumanization during the pandemic (see also O’Connor et al., 2021; Ye, 2021). Governments have often outsourced the policing of the noncompliant to the “responsible” citizens, by encouraging reporting and/or shaming of the noncompliant in the name of the greater good. This irresponsible license to openly bully one’s fellow humans while feeling good about it (me = “grandma saver” vs. you = “grandma killer”, or more recently, “variant incubator”) seems to be underpinned by

two interlocked revaluations: (1) the rebranding of the “vice” formerly known as fear or cowardice into the “virtue” of responsibility, civic-mindedness, solidarity, and being “pro-science”; and (2) the rebranding of the virtue of standing up for freedom and human rights into the vice of toxic masculinity, being anti-social, “anti-science”, psychopath, selfish, criminal, or a right-wing extremist. This dynamic has produced pernicious social geographies along new axes (e.g. pro-maskers/anti-maskers; pro-vaxxers/anti-vaxxers). The compliant are deplored by the noncompliant as obedient “sheep”, whereas the noncompliant often are referred to by the compliant as “plague rats”. Who benefits from sowing these social divisions? Prior research has repeatedly indicated that dehumanization is an early warning indicator of worse things to come (“re-education”, segregation, camps, genocides, Fascism, etc.; cf. Vaes et al., 2021). Why do our elites selectively exercise “an abundance of caution” to prevent COVID-19 deaths, but not to arrest our descent down the slippery slope of dehumanization and toxic social divisions?

Third, we noted the lack of a balancing act and of proportionality in the (mis)management of the pandemic, but as one of our reviewers pointed out, “the most challenging job is to conduct a balancing act when we are facing an unknown risk”. To what extent, and for how long, is it acceptable to invoke uncertainty as justification for authoritarian rule? Furthermore, given that uncertainty presents itself as a range of possible outcomes, what is the intellectual justification for focusing on the worst-case scenario, independent of its actual likelihood (cf. Furedi, 2008, 2009; Malviya, 2021)? In psychotherapy, patients who assume that the worst-case scenario will happen are said to commit the cognitive distortion known as catastrophizing (Waltman and Palermo, 2019). During the pandemic, however, people who refused to dwell on the worst-case possible outcome were often dismissed as “denialists” (Ferguson, 2021). What is the relationship between catastrophizing and the intellectual footprint of the precautionary principle (Stefánsson, 2019)? Does the precautionary principle run the risk of becoming the favourite excuse of tyrants promising to do whatever it takes to keep us safe from real and imagined dangers? The often-heard phrase “out of an abundance of caution” is unintendedly ironic because the narrow-mindedness of minimizing only one type of risk (COVID-19 deaths and illness) regardless of the many other resulting risks (economic, political, psychosocial, medical, etc.) strikes us as reckless if not outright criminal (Baral et al., 2020). Philosophers have repeatedly noted that the relationship between knowledge and uncertainty is often counterintuitive, such that more knowledge often generates more uncertainty, not less (Rescher, 2018). Each new fact we learn about COVID-19 triggers an aura of related questions, that prompt new research, which brings answers that lead to yet more questions. This expanding intricate web of knowledge-and-uncertainty means that authoritarians can always invoke uncertainty to justify emergencies and restrictions.

Finally, we have addressed our paper to critical geographers and to the Academic Left, more generally. But to what extent is the very Left vs. Right distinction becoming misleading and counterproductive? Perhaps, as one

of our reviewers noted in relation to the work of Qin Hui (2005) and George C. S. Lin (1997), “it is more important to seek a shared baseline of values rather than engaging [in] fierce ideological debates”. As far as we are concerned, in this paper we have used the shorthand “Academic Left” to denote all scholars who (a) believe that politics cannot and should not be separated from academic research, teaching, and service, and (b) commit themselves to openly promoting the ideals of equity and social justice through their professional activities. But beyond these generalities, how much common ground do we really still have? We need to ask ourselves, in the words of one of our reviewers, “isn’t there something a bit... reactionary and authoritarian about the Academic Left, as a sort of construction that sometimes becomes a caricature of itself? In the way it polices, censors, both self and other” (see also Costello et al., 2021)? Our hope is that, as we collectively engage in the soul-searching and frank discussions needed to answer these questions, we will witness the growth of a new wave of anti-authoritarian Leftist thinking that reaffirms the centrality of human rights and civil liberties to making the world a better place.

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