



Brave New Normal World

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When politicians begin to speak of a post-corona “new normality”, what does that imply? And why should we be concerned?

The spread of the coronavirus and the intensity of reactions – from personal to political, emotional to economic – are literally mind-blowing. From us social scientists, they compel reflection but also challenge everything we think we know. What appears true today may be absurd tomorrow. To me, the bottom line is this (and I realize perhaps I didn't make it sufficiently clear in my [last post](#)): quite apart from the question [how big a threat](#) the virus is in biological or medical



terms (which is not to suggest it isn't!), this social, political, and economic crisis will change the world. Alas, one tendency emerging from these ongoing changes is toward greater political authoritarianism and constraints on basic freedoms. Terrorized by the mounting death tolls, Euro-American citizens by and large accept restrictions on their liberties and the expansion of executive powers as “emergency measures” – and indeed, are often calling for more.

But “temporary” emergency measures exhibit a curious tendency to become permanent.

This may apply, for instance, to restrictions on public assembly, [ever expanding surveillance](#), or “flexible” (read: precarious) labour relations and automation of people’s jobs. Meanwhile, the generalized self-reproducing anxiety creates conditions in which it becomes increasingly difficult to critically reflect – individually and collectively – on long-term effects of what is going on. A generalized and potentially permanent “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) is being introduced, globally, among overwhelming confusion and fear.

In my original post, about a week ago, I wrote: “it comes to mind that the ruling elites (...) are using the pandemic to push the boundaries of the normal.” These words echoed uncannily to me when, on 24 March, Poland’s Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced new restrictions on movement, not unlike those introduced these days in many European countries. He said the measures were meant to enable, in some time, a “[return to a new normality](#).” This “new normality,” he added, would not be “as before, because we will have to very strictly follow all sanitary procedures.” This ambiguous expression, as much as the new restrictions themselves, stirred up a flurry of questions and comments across the media.

Normality itself is a loaded concept.

As [Vincanne Adams](#), [Andrew Littlejohn](#), and [Raza Saeed](#) show, in different ways,



the “normality” of the capitalist order formed the ground for the present crisis; the biological phenomenon – the virus – merely accelerated disastrous processes that had long been underway. The point is more generally made in the anthropology of “natural disasters”: catastrophes are often, if not always, outcomes of structural inequalities which have been normalized as the regular course of social life (e.g. Oliver-Smith 2009). So when governments say the post-epidemic “normality” will no longer be as before, perhaps we should welcome that as a promise? But the paradigms of the capitalist political economy are not questioned by those in positions of power. Quite the opposite: the explicit aim is to rebuild capitalism as quickly as possible – by autocratic means if need be. It is the everyday lives and prospects of ordinary people that will be affected. Some, like the *MIT Technology Review*’s editor-in-chief [Gideon Lichfield](#), predict that in the long run, lockdowns such as today will have to be in force for roughly two months out of every three – unless we accept preventive measures in the form of unprecedented levels of surveillance targeting every one of us individually as a potential [“plague-spreader”](#). The logic of addressing the crisis by shifting the burden to society, and disproportionately to its middle and lower strata, while cushioning the corporate elites is familiar. Just as ordinary citizens are called to sacrifice for “climate change mitigation” while little is done to stop the rapacious industries from further ravaging the Earth, so with the pandemic, civil liberties and ordinary people’s jobs are to be sacrificed while governments from Warsaw to Washington are busy saving the banks and corporations who, as [Julie Billaud](#) remarks, contributed to the catastrophe.

Two days after the PM’s press conference, on 26 March, Poland’s Health Minister, Łukasz Szumowski explained in an [interview](#) just what that “new normality” would look like. The goal is to keep the economy running, but the lesson to be learned from the pandemic – the *benefit* – is that much work can be done online, the Minister said. Presumably, then, this is what the government is going to encourage, or decree. Other than work, all forms of social contact will be affected, Szumowski stated candidly. Practices such as greeting others with a handshake, a kiss, or a hug, social gatherings, home parties, and barbecues – will



all have to be “socially stigmatized” for as long as there is no “commonly available vaccine” against covid-19 (read: [indeterminately](#)). Szumowski was referring specifically to Poland, but a recent study from [Imperial College London](#) advises strict “social distancing” as a general strategy for as long as there is no vaccine that works.

One fundamental reason to worry is that thinking is an intersubjective process that is impoverished without the possibility of direct spontaneous exchange.

Permanent “social distancing” will thus negatively affect all areas of intellectual activity, from education and research to artistic creation, to cultural criticism and political critique. Moreover, the normalization of “social distancing” implies lasting restrictions on the freedom of assembly and movement. Despite the hype several years ago about the wave of so-called “facebook revolutions”, you can’t have a revolution without actually getting together with large numbers of other people in physical space. And of course, critical and subversive thought becomes more traceable when it turns digital. The pre-emption of collective dissent is thus a serious concern. Governments in multiple countries are taking concrete steps curtailing civil and political rights amid the havoc of the day. The granting of practically [dictatorial powers to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán](#) by Hungary’s parliament made headlines around the world. But to stick to examples from Poland, a recent draft of a blanket law designed mainly to safeguard economic stability, the so-called “anti-crisis shield”, contained rules that would extend police powers and, inter alia, allow prosecutors (not courts) to put [any suspect under house arrest](#) for up to three months. And the Health Ministry, meanwhile, has [banned doctors from issuing public statements](#) about the pandemic – a step grimly evoking China’s information control policy. In response to Giorgio Agamben’s by now [oft-quoted posts](#) on the present pandemic conjuncture as a “state of exception”, some critics have suggested that the pandemic creates an opportunity for a [“democratic biopolitics”](#) from below, where fear is replaced by social solidarity, and discipline by an ethics of care. That would indeed be a welcome development, and the [solidarity initiatives](#) that appear in many cities are



perhaps harbingers of something of that kind. However, it is important not to overlook the fact that these initiatives coexist with, and, as I argued in [my last post](#), inadvertently help normalize, coercive biopolitics “from above”.

At a different level, I am concerned about what this indeterminately prolonged state of exception may mean for social relations as such – or, more precisely, for our capacity to live as social beings.

As we know from both Durkheim and Tarde – to name but two among social theory’s Founding Ancestors – embodied affects are the kernel of all sociality, in humans as well as other animals (see Mazzarella 2009; Massumi 2014). They are formed and intersubjectively transmitted in direct eye-to-eye and tactile contact (also Massumi 2002). This is precisely what we are risking to lose in prolonged lockdown. Human communication has been mediated through various technological means for a very long time now, and there’s a lot to be said about the benefits of communication technologies. But the less non-mediated contact we have, the more debilitated our embodied relational capacities will become over time, turning us from Aristotle’s “social animals” increasingly into automata. This transformation will not happen overnight. But it may come faster than one might think.

There is a clear politico-economic dimension to this. Our lives in the post-covid-19 “new normality” are envisioned to become reduced to just two functions: production and (maximally individualized) consumption.

No gratuitous activities will be possible, or very few.

Every exchange we have via “social media” is not our own – it is a commodity in the data market. Most of us know and accept this as a matter of fact. But in lockdown, even more of our everyday communication will depend on these commercial technologies. Thus, the process of alienation, which, as Marx noted, began with the appropriation of our labour, might soon culminate in near-total



capitalist appropriation of our time and commodification of our communicative capacities.

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