

## ON CORONA DAYS

### Viruses

Viruses have been around far longer than humans and will likely outlast them. There are millions of types and thousands of species of viruses. In the argot of scientists, viruses are “biological entities”. The modifier “biological” distinguishes living from non-living entities; dogs and trees from rocks and benches. Since *life* scientists do not know what life is, they use more or less arbitrary criteria to distinguish animate from inanimate entities.<sup>a</sup> A virus does not reproduce but replicates on contact with a living cell. A virus is not capable of auto-mobility but must be transported between living organisms by direct or indirect contact. Using such criteria as reproduction and locomotion to distinguish slugs from stones condemns the virus into a liminal zone. Scientists do not consider the virus as dead or alive, as for example the poliovirus which, if stored at minus 20 centigrade, can be kept in suspended animation — inert yet potent — indefinitely.<sup>b</sup>

### Crown of Spikes

Official rules for disease nomenclature forbid names that “...refer to a geographical location, an animal, an individual, or group of people” while requiring them to “be pronounceable and refer to the disease”. Therefore, both Sars-Cov-2 and Covid-19 are acronyms, the first understood to cause the second.

The Sars-cov-2 virus belongs to a new class identified in 1968 by a group of British virologists. Unlike other viruses, these had a distinct morphology — a fringe of spikes that project out from their enveloped surface. Reminded of the solar corona, the ring of light around the sun best seen during an eclipse, the scientists called them coronaviruses. The word corona derives from Latin for crown or wreath, “the mark or emblem of majesty”. Thus, coronavirus: a class of virus named for its crown of spikes.

### A Fearsome new King

A quarter century ago, the anthropologist Emily Martin described how scientists and laypeople conceived the relation between humans and viruses as an implacable war of two worlds.<sup>c</sup> Accordingly, viruses and other “invading hordes” continuously “attack” the human “immune system” which, through antibodies, attempts to “defend” itself.

On February 11, 2020, Sars-cov-2 was crowned an agent of global disease and death. From China to USA, all nations bowed before this coronated virus that colonizes its human hosts to propagate. All were aware that each could be a collaborator with this “elusive” enemy. Deferring to the “invisible threat” against all humanity, the Pope celebrated Easter in a church without a congregation. Politicians joined the people to fight, from behind closed doors, a world-wide war against the “smart” and “tough” foe.

### Lockdown

Almost a third of the human species is under different levels of lockdown. Since April Fools’ day, all Pennsylvania residents have been ordered to “stay-at-home.” Whoever thought up this phrase is well schooled in public relations. “Stay-at-home” makes “house arrest” seem less confining. Once used to train a population to endure nuclear war, “shelter-in-place” has been rebranded so that a coronavirus evokes an atom bomb. Obeying the order means that none can leave the house except for approved reasons (which includes walking the dog) and when out, to maintain the recommended distance of six feet between humans. It is an

exaggeration to compare this situation with being locked up in prison, though minions of the law do enforce the order all over the world. Sirens blare warnings to stay at home on the streets of Bergamo, Italy, gun toting cops hand out fines and jail sentences in Washington, DC, constables wearing bright red corona helmets beat up pedestrians in Delhi, India.

#### Lockdown: military strategy

The lockdown is a phase in the war of humans against Sars-cov-2. It is designed to slow down but not to eliminate death and disease, and as such resembles a military strategy called “defense in depth”. That strategy does not presume to stop or rebuff an overwhelming enemy force with a firmly defended front. Instead, the enemy is allowed to advance into the interior, inducing it to stretch and diffuse its forces. By delaying a frontal confrontation, the defenders get time to shore up defenses and mount counterattacks. The lockdown suppresses the spread of Sars-cov-2 by confining its potential agents. The period of confinement is used to increase the availability of hospital beds, ventilators, and protective equipment. The population is then released from confinement at a rate never greater than the capacity of health facilities.

#### Science-based war

In the US, scientists are the generals of the war against Sars-cov-2. The lockdown was prompted by scientific data and evidence that the virus was an unusually effective killer of humans. Virologists and epidemiologists quickly established that Sars-cov-2 was novel, contagious, and lethal. A new virus is one to which humans have no immunity. A contagious virus infects a large number of humans and a lethal one kills its host. None of these three characteristics is of great concern if they occur individually. The Mers-cov virus was both new and lethal but not very contagious. In contrast, the flu virus is very contagious, though neither new nor thought sufficiently lethal to warrant a war. Sars-cov-2 is considered deadly because it exhibits all three characteristics at once — new, highly contagious, and very lethal. About 1 in a thousand die from the flu each year, up to half a million annually world- wide. The initial scientific data from Wuhan China estimated a fatality rate thirty-four times worse than the flu, suggesting Covid-19 was extremely lethal.

#### Morbid Accounting

Scientists rely on the infection fatality rate (IFR) to measure the lethality of an infectious disease. The IFR measures the proportion of infected people who died from a disease over a specified period of time. The IFR is therefore composed of three data — the number of people infected by the virus, the number of people dead from the virus, and the time period over which these events occurred.

The IFR reported for Sars-cov-2 is unreliable because the data used to calculate it are incomplete, inaccurate, and imprecise. The actual number of humans infected by the virus will never be known. Even statistical estimates of that number require testing the population widely for both those infected by the virus and those who have recovered from the disease. In the US, testing for Covid-19 is so far restricted to those who present severe symptoms. Severely symptomatic patients are most likely to be suffering from the disease. The number of infected Americans is undercounted because this testing regime leaves out those that have either recovered or are asymptomatic. Consequently, the data on the number of humans infected are incomplete. Small scale efforts to obtain a better estimate of the number infected paint a less dire picture of the fatality rate. In Santa Clara county of California, random testing of the population suggests the fatality rate there to be about that for the flu, a finding

similar to that in Iceland, the country with the most widespread testing.

Respiratory diseases are the third leading cause of death in the US, accounting for some 225 thousand deaths in 2017. Tests for Covid-19 should accurately register only those who are infected by Sars-cov-2. They should not inaccurately register those suffering from the many other infectious diseases that manifest with similar symptoms. Tests used to screen for breast cancer have an error rate of 13 percent. The tests for Covid-19, a new disease, are not likely have a lower rate of inaccuracy than that for breast cancer. Furthermore, Covid-19 patients can take a couple of weeks to present symptoms, if at all, and a further couple of weeks to develop a fatal disease, if at all. Counting the daily dead is an imprecise indicator of the fatality rate of a disease that takes between two to four weeks to become fatal.

It is not only the number, accuracy and period of testing that contribute to the unreliability of the infection fatality rate. That is exacerbated when those dying *with* Covid-19 are added to those dying *because* of Covid-19. If two persons testing positive for Covid-19 die, and one is an elderly man with a history of bronchial infection, it is likely he died *with* Sars-cov-2. The other, a marathon runner without any known illnesses, is likely to have died *from* it. Confounding the two conditions means that every dead person who tested positive for the virus would be counted as having died from it. The mortality statistics from New York City, the epicenter of the epicenter of Covid-19, not only ignores the distinction between dying from and dying with the disease when displaying the “confirmed cases” of death from Covid-19. They also include as “probable”, untested decedents who are certified to have died from Covid-19 or equivalent.

Obviously, the unreliability of data does not mean Sars-cov-2 is benign. It only means that policy makers who propose and implement a war against the virus cannot rely on the data for decisions. Instead, they must possess the ability to see through the numbers.

### Plastic Numbers

Even if most experts can agree that the IFR is unreliable because the data to calculate it are incomplete, inaccurate, and imprecise, few would argue it is useless. The honest admission of unreliable data should reinforce the irreducible need for prudent judgment in uncertain times. Instead, epidemiologists blur the distinction between foresight and fortune-telling by feeding such data into scientific models that predict the lethality of Sars-cov-2.

The results of a model made by a highly regarded scientific team from Imperial College, London predicted 510 thousand Britons would die from Covid-19 if no measures were taken to stem or stop the disease. A few weeks later a rival scientific model from Oxford predicted far fewer deaths. By assuming social distancing and recalibrating the model parameters, the original team reduced its own estimate of excess deaths from Covid-19 by 98 percent to about 10,000. Similarly, the results of a model by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) based in Seattle Washington, suggested between 100 and 240 thousand Americans would die from the virus even with social distancing policies in place. Ten days later, on April 11 the revised IHME estimate of the same number was 61,000. The wild swings in these estimates prove that modeled results should not be confused with evidence.

A model of a phenomenon is not the phenomenon itself. The results of a model are not evidence but, at best, a hypothesis to be verified. To use the results of a model as if they were adequate evidence for decision is to confuse evidence and speculation. This distinction is obscured by the aura of indubitable truth cast by mathematics, even when conducted in a speculative key. The results of scientific models are dependent on the raft of assumptions and

quality of data used to make it up. In 2017, the most recent year for which US mortality data is readily available, a total of 2.8 million individuals died. The lockdown policy was partly justified by the scientific prediction that 2.2 million Americans would die from Covid-19. When speculation is mistaken for evidence it goes unquestioned that almost as many will die from one respiratory disease in 2020 as have died of all diseases in 2017. Scientific models do not change the principle well known to computer programmers: garbage in, garbage out.

### Professionals as propagandists

In the US, “listening to science” has become both a weapon and shield. “Science says”, “research shows”, and “health care professionals recommend” have become mantras that confer the halo of truth on the speakers’ words and muffle disagreement. These phrases have also become shields against the uninformed opinions of talk radio hosts, TV show anchors, and their political puppet. Whether as weapon or shield, when white-coated scientists are given speaking roles in public and when public health professionals are roped into selling public policy, they become unwitting propagandists.

Scientific knowledge is produced by narrowly specialized scientists. The virologist describes the morphology of Sars-cov-2, the epidemiologist explains the etiology and disease vectors of Covid-19, a public health professional evaluates the shortage of medical staff in the midst of a pandemic, the economist weighs the benefit of allowing the many to work against the cost of letting a few to die. Specialism can be at odds with each other — for the public health official, no price is too high to save a life. For the economist, cost-benefit analysis must prove that a life is worth saving. Moreover, each specialism is riven by debate and disagreement, particularly in the midst of an unfolding phenomenon. Respected bio-statisticians and experienced pathologists have repeatedly insisted that the data are too unreliable to unequivocally support the policy of lockdown.<sup>d</sup> Veteran infectious disease specialists from the US, Germany, and Sweden, have vehemently disagreed with the policy of suppressing a contagion that must inevitably spread.<sup>e</sup> At best, these scientific disagreements are muffled when public policy corrals specialisms into what “science says”. At worst, counter-arguments are derided as conspiracy theories against the public good.

Moreover, the bio-statistician who recommends to “prepare for the worst” is not making a scientific statement any more than the economist who suggests “continue business as usual.” Both turn into propagandists when they are pressed into service as handmaidens of the law. For example, Dr Fauci, the redoubtable face of public health in the US said on March 8 that “there is no reason to be walking around with a mask”. A week earlier the US surgeon general Jerome Adams insisted in a tweet that “masks are not effective in preventing the general public from catching coronavirus”. It was not until early April that it finally became good science to wear a mask to curtail an infectious disease spread by droplets sprayed when coughing or speaking. Public “guidance” on wearing masks changed because experts were no longer afraid of a run on masks and because they began to teach on TV how to make home-made masks. Experts find it necessary to “message” citizens because they believe that like children, citizens need to be guided. After 8 pm on Sunday April 19, 2020 it is a punishable offence in Pennsylvania not to wear a mask when shopping for groceries. Apparently, even coronavirus obeys the commandments of the law.

Despite the assurances of a scientifically grounded public policy, there is not much “science” supporting the world-wide lockdown. The data are unreliable, evidence competes with speculation, and professionals struggle to keep aloof from propagandists. Yet, the invocation of “data-driven, evidence-based policy determined by scientists and public health

professionals instead of politicians” reverberates with suggestive resonances. The words exude a comforting connotation but denote little. The listener feels safe in blankets made of white-coated professionals, revelatory numbers, and effective cures. However, such “sentences” are better understood as made from plastic words in the sense of Uwe Poerksen, who described their political effects.<sup>f</sup> Plastic words are formless and even meaningless in themselves. Yet, strung together and wielded as clubs, plastic words can be used by managers to command uncomprehending listeners to fall in line with their plans and programs.

Frightening the citizenry into obedience with untruths and shocking acts is a political tactic at least as old as Machiavelli. A speaker need not believe the truth of what he says when speaking to persuade rather than to enlighten the listener. Truth and lie are of no concern to the propagandist who seeks to influence instead of to inform citizens. The professional who turns into a propagandist persuades the listener to take him seriously.

### Executives

The often-heard appeal that politicians should give way to professionals is to ask for government by experts. But a technocracy is not a democracy. Nor is technocracy a remedy for an oligarchy, much less for an incipient autocracy. At least notionally, modern political regimes acknowledge that the power of governments to make laws, implement them, and judge infractions against them must be separated. Hence, the well-known architecture of distinct but overlapping legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. There was no room for the executive power in Aristotle’s understanding of political regimes. But he did acknowledge the need for executioners. In Machiavelli, there is little difference between a tyrant and the prince who is encouraged to commit acts of cruel execution to maintain public order. The separation of powers in modern governmental apparatuses is intended to tame but not defang the Machiavellian prince.<sup>g</sup> The current president of the US is known for playing a chief executive officer of a corporation on a reality TV show. The tag line of that show — “you’re fired!” — makes obvious the otherwise hidden link between executioners and executives.

The rise of the executive branch of government reaches something of an apex with a president who now claims “total authority” to decide whether and how long the population will remain confined to their houses. He brings to a head the generation-long paradigm of US governance, that “government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem.” The deliberate suffocation of the administrative apparatus of the state over forty years included burying under narrow business interests, agencies that produce scientific data useful to public policy. Debilitated by years of abuse and calumny, these institutions now disintegrate.<sup>h</sup> Steadily, the executive branch of the US government has become something of a fiefdom. Twenty years ago, a “decider-in-chief” combated the crisis of terrorism. Ten years ago, government by “executive orders” combated the crisis caused by an uncooperative legislative branch. The slow erosion of the distinction between office and office holders has culminated in the obscene cult of the individual now on display. “Morning in America” dawned forty years ago. We now live through its twilight, as crises and the aggrandizement of the executive powers of government feed off and engorge the other. The coronavirus pandemic fuels and entrenches the grip of executive authority, of autocratic government.

### Two pandemics

There are two pandemics underway. In the strict sense of all people (Greek: *pan demos*) Covid-19 is the lesser pandemic. The fear of sars-cov-2 is the greater pandemic. Far

fewer people have been infected by the virus than are fearful of it. The fear of the pandemic has proven more contagious than the pandemic itself. The smallpox virus that decimated much of the aboriginal peoples on the American continents was carried from Europe at the speed of ships. Sars-cov-2 travels at the speed of jet planes. Throughout human history, infectious agents have been carried at the speed of human travel along trade routes. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fear of the virus moves at the speed of what the lighted screen shows.

### The Coronavirus Pandemic Show

A virus cannot be seen, either by the naked eye or through an ordinary optical microscope. For example, it is said the coronavirus is ten thousand times smaller than a grain of salt. Except for those looking through an electron microscope, none can see it. Yet almost all know what it looks like because they have been shown suitably doctored images of it. Seeing what they are shown is a training in how to see on command. Even a seven-year old child can now draw as a crowned circle the coronavirus he has been shown but did not see. Viewers of the “coronavirus pandemic” show on CNN forget they see neither the virus nor an image of it. Mesmerized by the visualizations they are shown, viewers confuse reality TV for reality.

The production of the coronavirus pandemic show is a global affair. From Wuhan China to Seattle Washington, king corona is beamed to all corners of the earth. Glowing TV, computer, and phone screens display its message to billions. Like all kings, Sars-cov-2 has a retinue of courtiers and ministers that heralds its coming, tracks its movement, and attests to its power. Popularizing books by academics, movies about contagions, and TED talks by billionaire philanthropists prepared the psychological soil to welcome the king. Now, virologists and epidemiologists, public health officials and politicians, data analysts and statisticians occupy various rungs in the hierarchy of royal attendants that produce and disseminate the data stream needed for the show. TV program producers, newscasters, and social media influencers package bits and pieces of the data stream into segments that are stitched together as the coronavirus pandemic show.

Global maps colored in shades of red mark the countries, cities, and towns in which the coronavirus has taken residence. The number of confirmed cases infected by coronavirus pulse in threatening circles. Hotspots identify the cities where far too many suffer and die. Curves show the exponential speed with which the virus king moves through its subjects, histograms track the daily number of deaths, and pie-charts display the proportion of its dying population that is young or sick. Video clips of masked humans shuffling on empty streets reinforce the need to hide from the evil king. Death counters produced by reputable universities update the body count of the infected and dead, amplifying the dread of its implacable power. TV clips of patients on ventilators and in unburied coffins confirm the merciless tax exacted by the death dealing king. Reality TV does not illuminate reality but molds attitudes towards it. The coronavirus pandemic show generates fear of a shapeless menace, of a dreaded disease.

### Obedience

Machiavelli recommended fear over love as the more potent tool of statecraft. For him, when accompanied by the dread of punishment, fear is a reliable instrument with which to cow a populace into compliance. Spreading a climate of dread is useful for those interested in the government *of* people. But dread is a bad counselor for citizens interested in government *by* the people. Potent as it is, people do not obey only because they are goaded by the dread of punishment. They also can be habituated into obedience.

In this regard, Ivan Illich's arguments have lost none of their incisive lucidity. Years of schooling train students to do what the teacher asks. Students study only to pass the test and lose their curiosity to learn. Habitual reliance on professionals who legally enforce the purchase of their services trains citizens to believe that experts know best. Citizens no longer bother to question the evidentiary worth of incredible speculations and confuse obeying incomprehensible orders with deferring to trusted good sense. The constant subjection to disabling technologies transforms the self-understanding of its users. Just as those who travel by plane come to believe they went somewhere when air-freighted there, so also those accustomed to the show come to believe they see what they are shown.

But dread and habit do not exhaust the wellspring of obedience. Illich suggested an even more potent method to elicit ardent conformity. Obedience does not always require the force of law or the coaxing by authorities. A well-designed fetish like 'a life' will work just as well, if not better. People can be seduced by manipulative marketers to chase after enticing phantoms. Few can say what life is, least of all biologists who supposedly study it. Yet, all seem sentimentally attached to 'life', to preserving, fostering and saving it. However, this 'life' which none dare speak against, is not something definable or palpable but instead has the consistency of a doughy substance "amenable to management, to improvement, and to evaluation in terms of available resources..."<sup>i</sup>

### Saving 'Lives'

It is precisely to show how well he manages this squishy substance in terms of available resources that Andrew Cuomo, the Governor of New York, holds a daily press conference. It is aired by all the news channels. At the bottom of the TV screen are the phrases: Stay Home. Stop the Virus. Save Lives. The salvational intent animating the world-wide lockdown and related efforts to fight Sars-cov-2 could not be more obvious. The global lockdown cannot be fully explained as a scientifically informed and legally enforced response to an existential threat. Nor can it be fully understood as the result of a dread-filled population habituated to obeying experts.

Rather, the success of the global lockdown presupposes citizens who willingly commit themselves to a higher cause, to 'saving lives'. 'Lives' do not refer to concrete persons — a Mary or a Joe — but is the aggregate of biological entities with a human form. 'Life' vaguely conjures up his friend Mary, which is why Joe is sentimentally attached to saving it. Joe confusedly glides over the chasm that separates Mary from 'lives'. He feels that by participating in the program of 'saving lives' he is attending to his friend Mary. Joe thinks he saves himself when he enrolls in the program to 'save lives.' Joe can switch between being himself and seeing himself as an epidemiologist does. He makes the switch between being Joe and being 'a life' without noticing the change. Understanding the program of "flattening the curve" is sufficient to grasp that 'saving lives' has little to do with either Mary or Joe. 'Saving lives' is a method to manage 'life' by controlling the number of deaths.

### Managed 'lives'

Flattening the curve is the popular way to explain the mechanics of the lockdown. The curve shows the expected number of infected humans over a period of time. By instituting such behavioral controls as "handwashing, teleworking, limiting large gatherings...", the "number of cases" can be kept at or below "the healthcare system capacity", which includes nurses, doctors, ICUs, ventilators and the like. Calibrating the number of expected deaths by available hospital resources is an exercise in the field of supply chain management, well

known to industrial engineers and hospital administrators. Just as the number of shoes manufactured can be calibrated by the amount of leather available, so also the number of covid-19 cases can be restricted to the available hospital beds and medical personnel. It was this style of just-in-time management that previously gutted the facilities so much that it caused New York hospitals to be almost overwhelmed by sick patients during the flu season of 2018. Then, excess capacity was reduced. Now, excess infections are flattened.

The technique to manage a population was best explained by the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom, when he described the “exit strategy” from the lockdown. He thinks an exit strategy is necessary not only because the lockdown has finally begun to pinch the wallets of those who could, until now, afford to shelter in place. It is also prompted by the fear of a restive population that is unlikely to sit on its hands until a vaccine is invented. Mr. Newsom warns that ending the lockdown is not like turning on a light switch. This is because the death rates will soar if all restrictions are lifted at one fell swoop. Instead, the only way out of lockdown is to manage it as one would “operate a dimmer”. He intends “to toggle that dimmer, so that we get exactly the appropriate lighting, so that we can transition to herd immunity and that vaccine.” During a storm, engineers regulate the flow of water from a dam so it does not breach the banks of a river. Newsom wants to control the flow of humans in and out of their houses so that the resulting illnesses and deaths do not breach the medical system capacity. Like all good managers, he takes an experimental approach to solving the problem. He will try lifting a restrictive measure, say opening businesses on Sundays only. Then check the infection rates. If too high, he will reimpose that restriction and try easing another, say reopening high schools. If the resulting death rates are still unacceptable, loosen one constraint. Expand the capacities of ICU beds and ventilators. Check again the death rates. If now less than expected, cut back on medical capacities to save money. In the age of logistics, ‘saving lives’ is a management program that jointly optimizes both human and technical resources. ‘Saving lives’ elicits mawkish attachment from only those blind to the distinction between concrete persons and human resources.

This exercise in population management *may* increase the number of ‘saved lives’. But it *surely* reinforces the illusion that living is a scarce resource, maintained by machines and metered out by professionals. As argued by Michel Foucault, these contemporary methods of population management derive from a long-standing belief that the purpose of government is to care for the lives of all and of each. He describes the detailed, fussy, and meticulous techniques of public health surveillance prescribed at the end of the seventeenth century to combat a plague. Quarantines, contact tracing, self-isolation, immunity passports — none of these are anything but 21<sup>st</sup> century avatars of the three-hundred-year-old logic of biopolitics, a politics geared to administering and fostering life.<sup>1</sup> When life becomes an administered object, death becomes the consequence of administrative incompetence or neglect. “Flattening the curve” is a euphemism for managing the deaths from coronavirus, which *surely* reinforces the fantasy that dying is the consequence of medical mismanagement.

### Bare Lives

Flattening the curve is a technique by which some humans control the behavior of others. Self-isolation and social distancing are techniques by which people manage themselves, to do to themselves what population managers demand of them.

“Self-isolation” was a nineteenth century term that referred to countries unwilling to trade or negotiate with other countries. It now refers to the willing confinement of residents to their quarters. A common example of this is the number of people who have barely stirred out



of their houses for more than a month. They have reconfigured their residence into a fortress against viral invaders, replete with portholes to receive inputs and expel outputs. Money comes in to those still receiving an income for delivering work products, even if these are screened meetings. Nutrients are ordered online, prepared with minimal human contact, and left at the doorstep. Entertainment is piped in through cable wires while excrements are piped out through sewers. Muscles not needed for work or play are toned indoors on fossil fueled machines. With its inhabitants on life-support systems, the house mirrors a comfortable ICU for the healthy. As Marx prophesized, the freedom of a privatized life is expressed in the management of its animal functions. And outside the fortress, the social animal which speaks uses screens to distance itself from others of its kind.

In sociology, the phrase “social distance” is a quasi-technical term indicating the snobbery with which one social class keeps itself aloof from another. It now refers to the physical gap, measured by the distance spit travels, between humans. By learning social distancing, people are habituated into being separated from one another. “Alone together” has become a popular meme carrying the mushy feeling of camaraderie in trying times. It is the title of a book by Sherry Turkle, who studies the psycho-social condition of humans online. What she once decried has now become a comforting Twitter hashtag. Those trained to play multi-person video games know well the paradoxical condition of being alone together. None is alone since there is always some other with whom to interact. This other could even be a computer program called ELIZA, which mimicked a Rogerian psychotherapist who only repeated back to the patient as a question what it was told. To the chagrin of its inventor Joseph Weizenbaum, the program induced “powerful delusional thinking in quite normal people” who knew Eliza was a programmed respondent and yet felt “she” understood them.<sup>k</sup> Equally, none is together online because each is beyond the reach of the other. In the 1980s, AT&T had a TV ad that sold its phones as instruments to allow people to “reach out and touch someone.” Togetherness in the age of corona is experienced in Skype parties and Zoom dances with people who are separated by less than a mile. Those who have learned to be alone together fulfill, without irony, the techno-utopian life promised by Silicon Valley.

The TV doctor Sanjay Gupta of CNN sought the counsel of an astronaut, Scott Kelly, on how to deal with the physical and psychological effects of human isolation. It is not without interest that a man who spend time in a technological womb in outer space should now offer advice on how to live on earth. The human species was thought social and mortal. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has shown that ‘Life’ has always carried a political signature and names the condition of bare human survival, the ghostly human remnant, the precipitate left behind after the social has been politically leached out of men and women.<sup>l</sup> It is this ‘life’ — withered of social bonds and kept functioning until turned off — that the lockdown seeks to save.

### The Religion of ‘Life’

Agamben also helpfully clarifies that religion does not signify that which binds the human to the divine. Instead, as the etymology of the word reveals, religion refers above all to “stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relations with the gods...” Religious acts do not unite but instead divide humans from the gods. Gods become sacred because ritual observances and approved intermediaries remove them from everyday human contact. The exact and punctilious performance of rites supervised by priests both separates and makes accessible the very objects — the gods — they bring into being. The religious Brahmin must place the white thread he wears around his torso over the right ear before he

urinates. This act removes the thread from contact with excreta. This separating act simultaneously sacralizes the thread and transforms urine into a contaminant. Rituals that separate and fence off produce the spheres of the sacred and the profane, and so religion should be understood as that which “removes things, places, animals or people from common use...”<sup>m</sup>

In this sense, ‘life’ is a religious fetish even more powerful than the commodities of capitalism. A fetish is an object venerated for its salvific powers. Commodities and services are peddled as bringing happiness, health, and pleasure. But since ‘life’ is thought coextensive with existence itself, it can recode old and new commodities and activities in its image. Old commodities like toilet paper have been hoarded because they are vital to ‘life’. Consumers are being gouged for new commodities like plastic face shields because these protect ‘life’. Old activities have gained new meaning — handwashing is ‘life-enhancing’, handshakes are ‘life-threatening’. New activities such as being masked in public preserves ‘life’ while self-isolating is feared for possibly diminishing the ‘quality of life’. The subsumption of commodities and activities under the sign of ‘life’ institutes it as the supreme commodity.

Flattening the curve, social distancing, and self-isolating are rituals that separate humans from each other and from things. Flattening the curve presupposes ‘life’ as a commodity because it is made dependent on other scarce resources, like ventilators and tests. Medical devices and services are separated from common use by the medium of money. Bank balances and professional decisions control access to ‘life’ no less than to commodities and services. Medical protocols define who can get a test while medical exams certify who cannot operate a scanning machine. Administrative rules govern how far to stand from one another while laws stipulate which factory must shut its doors. When the doctor does triage she must compare “expected life years” or “quality of adjusted life years” to determine which ‘life’ is worth saving. Flattening the curve requires the fastidious performance of rites and the intercession of anointed intermediaries, both of which control access to ‘life’ and make it sacred.

The rituals of social distancing and self-isolating are no less efficacious in sacralizing ‘life’. Prudent actions can be easily distinguished from deadening rituals. Obeying an order to wear a mask on Sunday but not on the previous Saturday as if the virus obeys Sabbath is the sign of possibly ritual observance. Such behaviors are conducted with more or less scrupulous solemnity. The educated classes are particularly finicky practitioners of the purificatory rituals conducted for the sake of ‘life’. When shopping for groceries, they maintain the officially prescribed distance from attendants and other shoppers, clean their hands after contact with all objects, remove and separately wash away contaminants from both clothes and shopping bags on returning home. The war against coronavirus sacralizes ‘life’ by prescribing the rituals necessary to access it. Illich warned years ago that ‘life’ was becoming a sacred if spectral object, a fetish. The religion of ‘life’ may not be obvious in the sneer of moral superiority with which the faithful practitioners of approved behavior pressures others to follow. But the attempt to speak to a friend without wearing a mask should suffice to convince doubters of the power of the global religion of ‘life’.

### Sacrifice Zones

The religion of ‘life’ is not only instituted through the separations that isolate individuals and demarcate things. It is also reflected in the division of one group of humans from another. By legal order in early March 2020, a new category of Americans called “essential workers” came into existence. Why the CEO is not an essential worker while the

janitor is one was left obscure. Why Main Street comprises far more “essential workers” than Wall Street remains unanswered. Essential workers comprise about half of the population of working Americans. They are overwhelmingly minorities, they live paycheck to paycheck, the majority are women, and most need food donations two weeks into the lockdown. They are the garbage collectors, the instacart deliverers, the emergency room nurses, the doctors, the fire fighters... they are the ones who keep the lights on, the roads clean, the shelves stocked, and the machines humming.

The category of “essential workers” implies the existence of “non-essential workers” and conceals the category of “non-workers” —the unemployed, the unpaid, and the institutionalized, whether in nursing homes, prisons, or camps for undocumented immigrants. Curiously, there is loud chatter about essential workers but little about non-essential workers. If the essential workers are those who are necessary and indispensable, then the others must be relatively unnecessary and dispensable. Not much has changed in the life of non-essential workers. The truly dispensable among them were able to slip away from crowded, infection-ridden cities to restful solitary retreats by the mountain or the sea. Other non-essentials who could not afford that luxury, continue to sit unblinking in front of screens at homes instead of at the office. They do occasionally complain about the increased number of non-essential meetings.

Paradoxically, it is the essential workers who labor on the front lines for a pittance relative to the non-essential workers who hide out in their houses. It is the essential workers who are daily placed in dangerous conditions to ‘save the lives’ of the non-essential workers. Essential workers feel themselves exposed in a sacrifice zone from where they maintain the life-support systems needed for the survival of non-essential workers. Alain Colombié, the French doctor who went naked to protest the lack of sufficient protective equipment, described himself and his colleagues as “cannon fodder” in the war against Sar-cov-2.

It has become something of a comforting fad for the non-essential workers to pay lip service to their human life-lines by donating money, singing out of windows while banging pots and pans, and sending emojis of thanks to their saviors, all the while gravely intoning “we are all in this together.” De la Rouchefoucauld said hypocrisy was the tribute vice paid to virtue. Whether or not the praise of essential workers is hypocritical, it is they who are forced to occupy the sacrificial zones in the war against a virus.

### The Law to Care

Ivan Illich noted that care for the oppressed was the mechanism by which oppressors hid the truth that their oppression usually requires society’s victims to be agents of their own destruction.<sup>n</sup> The *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act* is a law that cares. It cares for the 27 million Americans (as of April 21, 2020) who filed for unemployment benefits because they lost their jobs and must stand in bread lines in a matter of weeks. It cares much more for the corporations whose sales have plummeted. It cares most of all for the banks and Wall Street firms whose stock market machinations continue to depend on taxpayer support. The gradient of those most needing the caring hand of government inclines steeply towards the rich and powerful. But the CARES act is not the only act of care. Dan Patrick the Lt. Governor of Texas, is willing to personally “sacrifice” himself and other elderly people for the economic wellbeing of his grandchildren because he cares. Others, like Eric Garcetti the Mayor of Los Angeles, are moved by the spirit of compassion and love for neighbors to support and enforce the lockdown. It is because you care for others that you should wear a mask. It is because you care for your own well-being that you should stop friends from

meeting you. It is because of your sincere concern for others that you should not share a meal with them, not walk with them, and let them die alone for fear of sickening them. One may be forgiven for thinking with John McKnight that such acts of care are a perverted mask of love.<sup>9</sup>

### Apocalypse Now

The feeling of doom is in the air. The lockdown has exacerbated the sense of catastrophe. Whether they are the migrant workers massed on the borders of Indian states, or the millions in the US who have lost their jobs, innumerable many are suddenly cast adrift without a livelihood. Countless more experience the menace of an invisible pestilence, not knowing when they will be released from confinement, anxious about ever being freed from continuous and intimate surveillance. A low-grade fever of panic and consternation afflicts many millions across the world. Some have begun to express this in acts of surly rebellion. Others mutely comply waiting for the ill-wind to blow over. Many, if not all, wish the program to save lives will work swiftly and that life will return to normal.

### Rain Dances

Management programs rarely fail. This is not only because they are like those who leave the battle field as victors by simply claiming victory. In a few months if not weeks, scientific facts like the infection fatality rate will be presented to show that the war against Sars-cov-2 was a resounding success. Management programs rarely fail also because they are like rain dances. Anthropologists discovered why the rain dance always works. If it rains after a dance, then the dance worked. If it does not rain after a dance, then the solution is to dance harder. In either case, there is no questioning whether the rain dance is effective. There is little doubt that the lockdown and related efforts will be successful, for similar reasons.

The success of the lockdown will coincide with opening up the economy. The idling machines will be cranked up because hunger, anger, and lost profits will pose a greater threat to 'life' than covid-19. Many lessons from this world-wide experiment — immunity cards, working from home, contact tracing, refinements of statistical methods and population management techniques — will be smoothly integrated into the operations of the economy. While the population managers — economists, bio-statisticians and the like — will attempt to commensurate “saved lives” and “excess deaths”, there will be no balance-sheet to chalk up two sides of this world- wide experiment, because there can be none. No comparison is possible between the dread of millions and the satisfaction of self-congratulatory population managers; there is no scale to weigh the increase in domestic violence against the decrease in pulmonary infections.

Sars-cov-2 interrupted the tick-tock of the world clock. The clock will soon restart. Before this tear in time closes up, before this opening becomes a rabbit hole papered over by the official keepers of memory, it is helpful to consider a second meaning of “apocalypse”. It did not originally mean a great cataclysm, a final catastrophe, the end of time. Instead, apocalypse means unveiling or disclosing; the act of uncovering or revealing. In this sense we can ask what corona days disclose.

### Full Disclosure

Most wish to return to normal life though some fear a new normal after corona days. But there will be neither a going *back to* normal nor an *entering into* a new normal. Corona days are not abnormal. They are only atypical. On corona days, 'life' is visible as that which is brutally managed to fit the capacity of technical life-support systems. On normal days, 'life' is less visible but no less suspended in a web of technological life-lines. On all days, living is

caught and molded into 'life'. Corona days only throw into sharp relief what is normally overlooked.

Normality is the almost complete and helpless dependence on commodities and services, on the market, on the economy. Without salaries and wages and work most if not all cannot obtain food, clothing, shelter, or pleasure. Those who now yearn for the freedom of normal life imagine liberation lies in the dependence on commodities and in the mediation of the show. The migrant worker in India and the unemployed in the US know that normal life is a game that stakes their very survival on a paycheck or a handout. They protest their enforced idleness during corona days because they have to work to eat during normal days. As Illich argued, the economy now exerts a radical monopoly over human existence. It is this thoroughgoing addiction which has come into clear view during corona days. Flattening the curve, self-isolating, and social distancing expose for all who can see, that 'life' is a religious fetish more powerful than mere commodities. As with any religious fetish, 'life' is venerated for its salvific powers. A fetishized life saves only those willing to function on life-support.

Sar-cov-2 is neither alive nor dead. It transitioned out of suspended animation to infect its human hosts. In their fight against it, humans parodied the virus and made obvious that the condition of suspended animation is not aberrant. The question is whether the normalcy of a fetishized life and its supporting apparatuses will remain at the epicenter of what is to come.

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*State College, PA,  
USA. May 5, 2020.*

## Endnotes

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<sup>a</sup> Tirard, Stephane, Morange, Michel, Lazcano, Antonio (2010) *The Definition of Life: a brief history of an elusive scientific endeavor*, *Astrobiology* 10,10, p.1003. “In spite of the spectacular developments in our understanding of the molecular basis that underlies biological phenomena, we still lack a generally agreed-upon definition of life, but this is not for want of trying.”

<sup>b</sup> Life scientists are too busy working to worry about whether viruses “exist” when in a state of suspended animation. See the illuminating discussion of this point in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (CA: Stanford University Press 2004); particularly pp 39-47

<sup>c</sup> Emily Martin (1994). *Flexible Bodies: tracking immunity in American culture from the days of Polio to the age of AIDS* (Boston, Beacon Press).

<sup>d</sup> John Ioannidis “A fiasco in the making? As the coronavirus takes hold, we are making decisions without reliable data,” *STAT*, 17, March 2020. John Lee, “How to understand — and report — figures for ‘Covid deaths’” *The Spectator*, March 29, 2020. See also by the same author, “How deadly is the coronavirus: It’s still far from clear” *The Spectator*, March 28, 2020

<sup>e</sup> Perspectives on the Pandemic II: A conversation with Dr. Knut Wittkowski, former chief biostatistician and epidemiologist at Rockefeller University Hospital, New York <https://ratical.org/PerspectivesOnPandemic-II.html> accessed on April 15, 2020. Comments by Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi, former director of Institute for Medical Microbiology at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany who claims the lockdown is “grotesque, absurd, and very dangerous.” <https://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2020/03/an-expert-says-the-current-response-to-the-coronavirus-is-grotesque-absurd-and-very-dangerous.html>, accessed April 5, 2020. Interview with Prof. Johan Giesecke, advisor to the Swedish government and Chief scientist for the European Centre for Disease prevention and control. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfN2JWifLCY&feature=youtu.be> accessed April 22, 2020. To glimpse the extent of disagreement among scientists about the public policy on Covid-19, consult the many video interviews of ‘dissident’ scientists conducted by [Freddie Savers of UnHerd.com](http://FreddieSaversofUnHerd.com)

<sup>f</sup> Uwe Poerksen, *Plastic Words: the tyranny of a modular language* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004).

<sup>g</sup> Harvey Mansfield, *Taming the Prince: the ambivalence of modern executive power* (NY: The Free Press, 1989).

<sup>h</sup> For example, in early March 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) further clarified its rule, ironically named “Strengthening Transparency in Regulatory Science.” In the name of regulating corporations, it gives them freer rein to pollute. To supposedly permit the validation of scientific results, the rule requires that the raw data used in such studies be published. This is a perverse way to stop all epidemiological studies on the effect of pollution on health since publishing the raw data would violate medical privacy laws.

<sup>i</sup> David Cayley (1992). *Ivan Illich in conversation* (Toronto: Anansi Press) is an excellent introduction to the thought of Illich. Consult, concerning technology, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Marion Boyars, 1973); concerning professionals, (1977) *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977); concerning the show, Guarding the eye in the age of Show, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1995, 28, 47-61; concerning life as a fetish, The Institutional construction of a new fetish: human life. in *The Mirror of the Past*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1992), 218-231.

<sup>j</sup> Michel Foucault, (1995) *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (NY: Vintage Books). Also, *The History of Sexuality, v.1* (NY: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>k</sup> Joseph Weizenbaum (1976). *Computer power and human reason: from judgement to calculation* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman)

<sup>l</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (CA: Stanford University Press, 1995)

<sup>m</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “In praise of profanation”, in *Profanations* (NY: Zone Books, 2007), pp.73-92

<sup>n</sup> Ivan Illich, “Shadow Work”, in *Shadow Work* (London: Marion Boyars, 1981), pp.99-116.

<sup>o</sup> John McKnight (1995) *The Careless Society: community and its counterfeits* (NY: Basic Books)