

The American Virus

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Putting a Face on Threat. Following the 9-11 attacks, the language used around the threat of terrorism had a decidedly viral ring to it. Direct comparisons between the terrorist and the virus were not infrequent. Both had a way of hitting unexpectedly, suddenly irrupting from below the threshold of perception, attacking from any direction with inhuman implacability and scattershot lethality, if not killer precision. The threshold of perception was often taken to coincide with the national border. The terrorist was the “faceless” enemy, as “other” as a rogue strand of RNA hiding in a swine, waiting to detonate in human flesh.

In the midst of this, a not particularly competent but imaginative domestic terrorist swung into action. In May 2002, mail boxes began exploding around the Midwest. Over a number of days, 18 improvised explosive devices had been planted in mailboxes from central Texas to northern Illinois. The attacks didn't seem random. They seemed to be following a pattern that was being filled in dot by incendiary dot. Was a message being sent from the enemies of the nation? Was this the prelude to a larger attack? Panic, and a multi-state manhunt, ensued. The perpetrator was apprehended before the plan was completed. He was close, though. He explained that he had intended 24 explosions. He reckoned he needed six more to draw a smiley face pattern across the American heartland.

The Smily Face Bomber's shrapnel smile was like a piecemeal jack-in-box grimacing: surprise! You have met the enemy, and it is you.

On Several Regimes of Fear. The Smiley Face Bomber had pipe-bombs. Today we have emoticons. We still have literally viral RNA bombs, but also informational zero-and-one viralities in the form of contagious trolling, conspiracy-theory mongering, and presidential tweets – improvised explosive devices for blowing up the social through its virtual mailboxes. The reflex to put a face on the “faceless enemy” is

still there, but without the irony. The frowny face is the emblem of the day.

Frowny-face in chief, human emoticon Donald Trump, has made intermittent attempts to put a face on the crisis, preferably non-white. He vaunted the imaginary role of his xenophobic southern border wall in slowing the spread. He insisted on calling Covid-19 the “Chinese virus,” even as the United States was becoming the epicenter of the pandemic (suggesting a different geographical appellation). He proposed quarantining the rest of the country from the diseased coastal elites of New York. He even floated the idea of dispatching the military to the northern border to secure the nation against the single-payer Canadian hordes. Because this is “war” – as surely as the “war on terror” was one – and what is a war without troops? The front-line “troops” public health specialists desperately call for mustering – the kind who wield test-swabs rather than military-issue weapons – lack the necessary drama.

Trump’s most consistent response, however, has not been to dramatize but to down-play. Cheered on by Fox News and sundry rightwing pundits and politicians, he transferred the template of climate denialism to the coronavirus. Hoax! they cried. This is a different way of putting a face on it – a “liberal” face. The virus is anodyne. The real threat is the terrorist bomb of stealth socialism. The nation is being scared sick so it will run back crying to “big government.” And even if the virus is a bit of a killer, we just have to push through and keep the country working. “We can’t make the cure worse than the disease.” The free-market economy must be saved at all costs. The most vulnerable, says Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, should be good troopers and prepare to self-sacrifice to save the country from this threat worse than death: a sick economy. The old, the immuno-compromised, the homeless, and all those who tend in the best of times to fall to the bottom of the triage list (the disabled, autistics, people with Downs, people with dementia, the poor) will be the nation’s unsung heroes. Never mind the resemblance to eugenics ...

This dual strategy, despite its self-contradiction of simultaneously dramatizing and downplaying, carried Trump to record high (for him) approval ratings. This implies that it was not a self-contradiction at all, but an operational coupling between two different ways of projecting threat onto an enemy face in order to

displace the perception of danger. The projective personification of danger and the subsumption of life itself to the economy go hand in hand, in a regime of fear. In the 9-11 era, the assimilation of the terrorist to the virus othered, dehumanized. The “unspecified,” “asymmetric” enemy was dominant, and we needed an explosive joker to remind us that fear can have a face. In our contemporary days of plague, the dominant is the assimilation of the virus to an identified enemy, locked in the all-too-human mirror symmetry of the face-off, the face-to-face, polarized by hate. The technique of othering is not over by any means. It strobes with personification, coexisting with the figuring of danger as one’s own other half. Trump’s approval rating skirted 50%. We have met the enemy – and it’s the other half of us. Asymmetric warfare, strobing with something like the moral equivalent of civil war?

And what of that other half? Not necessarily personifying or economizing, they (if I can extrapolate from my own experience) feel buffeted and besieged, as much by the threat of the virus as the response of the other other-half. Obsessively checking the news feeds in an endless attempt to take the temperature of a crisis that spits out the thermometer at every approach. Acutely aware of the unhumanness of the virus and the indifference with which it makes an event of its own emergence. Folded in on one’s own questioning and endlessly deferred need to get a grip. Although not personifying, this is intensely individualizing – as is the immunitary social distancing dutifully practiced between internet searches for the latest frightful numbers. Doesn’t individualization lie at the very basis of that same neoliberal economy the Donald Trumps and Dan Patricks of the world ask us to sacrifice our lives to?

Two regimes of fear: projective-aggressive and immunitary-defensive, personalizing and individualizing. Joined at the cursor in neoliberal agony. Is this the American virus? Smile.

Care for the Event. It has become something of commonplace in contemporary philosophy to say that, ethically and politically, the event is a call for us to become equal to it. Personifying and individualizing are not equal to an event that so forcefully demonstrates our interdependence. There is nothing like shutting down an economy to drive home how finely our lives are suspended in a net of mutuality. Never before has the neighborhood grocer or the

delivery person felt so integral to social existence. The very origin of the virus is tied up in an ecological web: a multispecies route of transmission the conditions for which scientists have long warned us are prepared by habitat destruction and global warming. It doesn't just take a village – it takes a planet. It takes care for each other, in consonance with care for the planet. It takes, not personification, but an embrace of our integral imbrication with each other in a more-than human world.

Instead of transferring denialism from climate change to Covid-19, we have the option of transferring the collective momentum that had been building in the climate emergency movement to mutual aid and celebrations of life in this crisis, looking already beyond it to continuing the fight against that larger crisis of which it is arguably a tributary. This includes taking steps now in the direction of the kind of economy that would never ask us – our neighbors, our planet – to lie down and die. This is what must be sung from the balconies: postcapitalism, out loud. And I don't mean the “democratic socialist” impersonation of it, which is more like an attempt at capitalism with a human face. It's much better than the alternatives on offer. But we've seen where faces get us.

Mutual imbrication with each other: let's try something transindividual this time. More-than human world: make it multispecies.

This is for you, Trump and Co.: looking back, it would give you one thing you could say you were right about. Except for the stealth part.

Out loud!

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