

Contagions, Sleepwalkers, and the Nonconscious of Social Media: An Interview with Tony D. Sampson

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The concept of contagion has marked 2020 as we have witnessed the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, this concept, situated as the ‘in-between’ of bodies, as that which breaks down their boundaries and compromises their supposed unity, has been also used to explain phenomena outside the domain of biology and viral microbes. The diffusion of fear, panic buying, or conspiracy theories, for example, which have accompanied the corona-virus outbreak, can be equally understood with reference to the logic of virality. While the marketing machine has been, with various degrees of success, frantically trying to get a handle on this logic, a number of attempts to conceptualize it have been made within cultural and media theory. In opposition to theories that take the domain of consciousness as its starting point, Tony D. Sampson has been, since the early 2000s, developing his own materialist brand of contagion theory. Contesting grasping contagion through analogies with biological diseases or seeing it as a contamination of an autonomous subject by false ideas, his approach has been focused on the bodily domain of affects, habits, and pre-personal inclinations. Sampson’s relational and process-oriented theory of virality has been most significantly advanced in his trilogy of books, which includes *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture*

(University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and the just published *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media* (Polity Press). To discuss his inventive new book and other issues related to contagion theory, I have emailed Dr. Sampson a few questions.

JM: In your new book, *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media*, you examine what you refer to as the establishment of a dark refrain, which corresponds to the rise of xenophobic tendencies and patterns that repeatedly spread throughout the digital networks. How can this concept help us understand the emergence and proliferation of xenophobic subjectivities?

TDS: The dark refrain, or dystopic refrain, begins its life in my work with what is considered to be one of Guattari's important contributions to *A Thousand Plateaus*. At least, according to François Dosse's biographical account, it is Guattari, the pianist, who probably conjures up the ritornello as a kind of organizing eternal recurrence. This is a refrain that pulls together the flightier notes of Sylvano Bussoti's rhizomatic musical score. It's a fanciful concept, a musicological analysis of politics, but I think it captures the cadence of these far-right populisms, which as we see, give rise to multiple xenophobic subjectivities. Not everyone is captured, clearly. However, we can see how the repetition of affective contagions, from the likes of Trump *et al*, can fix the habits and routines of a large enough swathe of a population to swing elections. It's a very similar political affect to the kind John Protevi writes about to help us understand how the Nazis orchestrated and performed the Nuremberg rallies in such a way as to entrain crowds in the 1930s.

It's important not to see the refrain as simply in opposition to the lines of flight that escape it. The relation between refrains and lines of flight are developed through consistencies, captures, seepages, speeds, velocities, and rhythms. Any line of flight has the capacity to become deadly, to become aligned with, entrained to other lines, rigid, unbending. The refrain

is not necessarily a calculated evil either. What makes Trump and Hitler similar is not just their racism, but also a lazy disdain for the democratic process. This is, for me, the overriding characteristic of far-right populisms today; their fake disdain for an establishment of which they are themselves a part. Uber capitalists, neo-cons, nationalists, overprivileged education, property tycoons, city traders, nepotists... all hidden behind their claim to be a “man of the people” or someone “who says it like it is.”

I introduced this refrain in an earlier book, *The Assemblage Brain*. It is central to what I call experience capitalism, a mode of capitalism increasingly focused on intensifying experiences in order to rhythmically entrain brainwaves and bodies. The refrain of the so-called user experience concretizes associations and influences the brain-body relation. It forces the brain-body to reminiscence by way of alignment and assimilation. The refrain works on experience. It puts brains and bodies to work.

In *A Sleepwalker's Guide*, I've expanded on this idea by noting a coincidence between experience capitalism, social media, and the rise of Trump and Bolsonaro. I'm not claiming anything new here in terms of drawing attention to a historical relation established between capital and the far right, but point instead to new coincidences like those established between the virality/growth business model used by social media platforms and the immunopolitics of neo-Nazis hate.

JM: The main points of reference for your analysis in *A Sleepwalker's Guide* are Gabriel Tarde and A. N. Whitehead, who both see the order of conscious ideas and judgments as secondary to that of affective relations. How do they figure in the dark refrain?

TDS: *A Sleepwalker's Guide* is a development of Tardean media theory given renewed impetus by Whitehead's philosophy of experience. Ultimately, what these two characters (Tarde and Whitehead) help me to do is grasp how the refrain works on subjectivities—cultivating resentment, race hate, and rendering people vulnerable to a repetitive cadence, aligning and assimilating experience. Indeed, Tarde and Whitehead come together to produce the conceptual persona of a new sleepwalker—an understanding of the collective nonconscious of social media. Along these lines, there's a great quote from Whitehead in *Process and Reality*, which I think encapsulates the sleepwalker caught in the event or the actual occasion. I included it in the book and it informed a series of somnambulist performances we did in the US last year with the artist Mikey Georgeson.

We sleep; we are half-awake; we are aware of our perceptions, but are devoid of generalities in thought; we are vividly absorbed within a small region of abstract thought while oblivious to the world around; we are attending to our emotions – some torrent of passion – to them and to nothing else; we are morbidly discursive in the width of our attention; and finally we sink back into temporary obliviousness, sleeping or stunned. (161)

JM: The concept of a dark refrain implies a certain repetition, which can be understood in terms of behavioral patterns, or habits, a conceptual emphasis that is also present in your previous books. According to Wendy Chun, the focus on habit formation should take precedence over that of viral spread when studying digital media. At the same time, it is clear that Chun does not want to completely dispense with the concept of contagion. “Whether or not a virus spreads,” she suggests, “depends on habits, from the regular washing of hands to practicing safe sex” (1) and perhaps the same can be said for the transmission of affect. What

is in your view the significance of the emphasis on habit? Can the production of subjectivity through habituation be squared with that through affective contagion?

TDS: Yes, I agree, I think the patterning of habit is very significant to my work. There's already some great work on habit too; Chun of course. I also engaged recently with Carolyn Pedwell's excellent work on habit. But I'm not sure if it's a simple matter of one (habit) taking precedence over the other (virality). In the Tardean frame such things as habits, customs, and imitation are not at all distinct from each other. For Tarde, they are part of a continuum, without beginning or end, an *imitation of imitation*. Take for instance your point about the washing of hands. There's a far more indistinct relation going on here between habit and contagion. Following Tarde's microsociology, handwashing would be *the example* that is imitated. So, a government official says everyone must wash their hand for 20 seconds while humming the national anthem—as the loonies in the UK wanted it. The aim is to get a population to imitate the habit, but this is not a new habit that needs to be learnt, of course. Early on, caregivers will have already tried to instill this habit in very young children, so that they repeat it throughout the day. "Wash your hands after going to the bathroom." It's the imitated action itself that get repeated, not simply the words. The habit the government wants imitated has already been imitated to the point at which it becomes a habit. This is the infinitude of the imitation of imitation.

One of the problems with making a distinction between virality and habit is that contagion is often regarded as *like* the viral mechanism of the biological equivalent. My point has always been that we must not limit virality to being like a virus. I'm more interested in the spreading of social phenomena independent of specific mechanisms. So, I would say that habits can spread. Indeed, habits are evidently contagious. And just to add that while it's true

that Tarde reduces all social phenomena to imitation, he does not exclude counter-imitation in his microsociology. So, there's room for saying that people can refuse habits, but that refusal is in itself a contagious potential. In a nutshell, it is the refusal that gets imitated. It's a bit like Trump saying he wouldn't wear a mask. How many Trump-like supporters will follow? How many will feel the same way? How often do the same reasons for not wearing one crop up? For Tarde, it is these oppositions between the micro-flows of imitation that produces social adaptation. To be clear, in Tarde there is no social without imitation, otherwise total non-imitation would lead to the breakdown of social relations. Perhaps if non-imitation existed then it would manifest itself as some aging recluse living a hut in the wilderness—the absolute antisocial act.

JM: Imitation or *mimesis* is indeed the central concept for many theories of social contagion (e.g., René Girard's theory of mimetic desire). Yet, the theory of contagion that you develop in your trilogy of books is presented through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari, who suggest that “becoming is never imitating” (305). For them, more or less deliberate mimicking of behavior has nothing to do with affects that constitute different forms of becoming (the becoming-woman of Daniel Schreber, the famous Freud's paranoiac, for example, does not consist of him identifying as a woman, but of his embodied feelings of having breasts). Deleuze and Guattari add that “[i]mitation enters in only as an adjustment of the block [of becoming], like a finishing touch, a wink, a signature” (305). What is the import of Deleuze and Guattari's critique of imitation, and how do Tarde's micro-imitations manage to sidestep it?

TDS: I've already set out some of Tarde's imitation theory above, but I think it's probably fair to say that from the outset my work has been equally informed by Deleuze and Guattari's machinic assemblages or desiring machines. Assemblages clearly work through contagion rather than mimicry. This is a point repeated over and over again in Deleuze and Guattari's two

schizoid books. I think the specific beef they had with imitation of this kind is based on Platonic mimesis and the tradition of representational modes of mimesis. So we can say that while becoming is not (mimetic) imitation, becoming is still a contagion. A becoming contagion might be experienced as a feeling or pre-personal affect that becomes a felt experience. For me the term affective contagion better captures a contemporary reading of Tarde than imitation.

In the new book, the problem of becoming-the-same and becoming-other is very important. In simple terms the former is where the refrain works more effectively, through alignment, assimilation, and entrainment. The enemy here is what Massumi calls the *Empire of Like* (97). Throughout *A Sleepwalker's Guide*, I try to come up with ways by which the refrain can be confronted by becoming-other. For example, I've argued for modes of contagion that smash the representational mirror of mimesis. One of my targets in this context is the influence of Lacan's mirror stage on people like Judith Williamson, whose significant work on advertising in the 60s and 70s posited a self-image that was 'created' by exposure to ideological infused ads. I describe this created self as a contagion theory of sorts, but one that erroneously draws on representational orders and a mostly self-contained, yet porous false consciousness. There are at least three theories that I use to counter these ideological mirroring processes. The first is R. D. Laing's psychological theory of experience, which goes some way to explain how shared experiences can be used to align, entrain and assimilate a population into a collective mimesis—producing like-minded consumers and cannon fodder. Then, later on, I expand on Roger Caillois's dangerous experiments with collective mimesis and Roberto Esposito's work on *immunitas*, *communitas*, and contagion. The latter of these influences leads to a proposal for an inoculation program for Nazis!

JM: As you mentioned, the central figure of your new book is Tarde's conceptual persona of a sleepwalker, which suggests that human beings are inevitably immersed in a network of affective relations that sway our thoughts and actions, and that insofar as we think our intentions and judgments are formed autonomously we are, in Spinoza's words, "dreaming with our eyes open" (282). Somnambulism is therefore not something that emerges due to the rise of digital networks but is rather seen as an inherent human condition. How does the contemporary somnambulism, which you see as incited by social media, distinguish from that of previous eras?

TDS: That's a nice quote from Spinoza. So, yes what makes Tardean subjects vulnerable to contagion is simply being part of the social. For Tarde, the social is imitation. The sleepwalker is not therefore an extraordinary condition. The reason why sleepwalkers dream with their eyes wide open or are neither fully awake nor asleep is that somnambulism is the default social position. But this connectedness is fairly opaque. I think it was Nigel Thrift who noted that after Tarde we need to think of a self as always etched with others. But most of us are seemingly unaware of the extent of this etching.

In *A Sleepwalker's Guide*, I've tried to develop on this idea by exploring a nonphenomenological experience. Which is to say, I do not reject a phenomenal sense of self as felt by a person, that sense of personality. But the relation to others is by and large outside of this tiny experiential bandwidth. There is this vast impersonal nonconscious, which experiences nothing more than itself. We could think of the nonconscious as a dark phenomenological experience or a hidden, repressed unconsciousness, but I don't think it's anything quite so theatrical or dreamlike. As a further development on *The Assemblage Brain*, I wanted to better explicate nonconscious experience and particularly collective nonconsciousness. Clearly a difficult nut to crack, but there are some authors, like Matthew

Fuller's work on sleep or Patricia Clough's user unconscious, who have attempted to describe experiences outside of the tiny bandwidth of consciousness.

Of course, to think nonthought experiences poses all kinds of problems, and I have debated elsewhere with Kate Hayles on this (Hayles and Sampson). In short, Hayles poses the problem that those of us who want to decenter human cognitive experience have to do so by channeling our theories through concentrated high-level cognitive thoughts. Therefore, all the abstract thinking necessary to thinking the unthinkable just proves how important the cognitive center is. But if we return to Tarde's conceptual personae, and launch it into the world of nonphenomenological experience, like a tool or probe, then, we can yield some interesting returns. Tarde's psychological self is just a component part of this much bigger etching.

This all sounds quite far-fetched, until that is, we start to read Whitehead on experience. I mentioned above Whitehead's somnambulist notion of a stunned subjectivity in *Process and Reality*, but I'm more interested in the way he wants to free experience from its subject predicate. It's not that experience only came into being (for want of a better term) when humans started to experience the world. If anything, human experience has distorted experience by fixing it to phenomenal subjective experiences. I wanted a concept of experience that was not solely attached to human experience. Like Clough's work on autoaffection, I see the collective nonconscious as a mode of experience that is kind of outside of experience based only on the subject predicate. The collective nonconscious is experience experiencing itself. This why it is important not make conceptual sleepwalkers into real persons. They must remain larval subjects.

To answer your point about social media inciting somnambulism, it is again Whitehead who provides some really interesting answers. To begin with, he discusses the aesthetic

registers of experience, which, in effect, influence decisions more so than the limited bandwidth of cognitive logic. For Whitehead, although humans seem to feel that they occupy their own experiences, think logically, critically etc., they do so through an aesthetic ontology. It is this ontological worldview that I think best describes social media. It's kind of ironic, since these platforms are the invention of cognitive logic. They are the outcome of brains that are supposed to think like computers. But on the contrary, the experiences that are shared on these networks, the collective experiences that are processed, churned, cultivated, passed on, turned into data; they are extra-logical.

JM: Your book also engages with an impasse related to the idea of post-truth, one that arises between positivist approaches, characterized by the insistence on objective reality, which they see as readily accessible, and s.c. postmodern approaches, which stress the difficulties linked to the idea of objectivity. For positivists, like Daniel Dennett, our post-truth condition is in fact something that can be traced back to the proliferation of 'postmodern' ideas. You suggest that tactics such as the undermining of evidence-based claims and creating false equivalencies can be already found with fascist strategies that predate the postmodernists by several decades. What were in your view the conditions of possibility for the explosion of post-factual discourse that we are witnessing? How did the rise of internet manage to so effectively crumble the consensus system of reality description and destabilize the epistemological authorities?

TDS: I owe a debt to William Connolly for drawing attention to this impasse and his suggestion that speculative philosophy might help us route round it ("Fake News and 'Postmodernism'"). On one hand, I think the whole postmodern analysis has run out of road. I see little point in writing off reality because it has been lost in some massive simulacrum. It's not that this approach is without merit. It partially describes an imploded mediatized society, and draws attention to the importance of sign values in a marketing-obsessed world, but I don't

think it provides the tools to grasp what has happened to truth or indeed to understand Trump. Sure, Trump is a kind of simulacrum. He is this revolting TV reality show host who became president. We didn't need postmodernist theory to predict this though. We just had to watch *The Simpsons*! The problem is, however, and following Connolly again, we have been exposed to post-truth, or rather Big Lies, as a fascistic strategy long before Baudrillard. Trump uses an old tactic of the far-right, like the Big Lies about the Reichstag fire, which were used to stoke fear about a communist plot and curtail democracy. Trump's nasty, racist Big Lies are just more of the same.

On the other hand, the positivists have also had their moment pass them by. Their claim to have access to objective, brutal fact is easily collapsed through a speculative approach. The problem isn't that facts have been corrupted by postmodernism, as they bemoan. Simply put, fact now and fact then is likely to be something very different to fact tomorrow. Fact can be more than itself. Facts can oscillate between softness and brutality, between actuality and virtuality.

With regard to the internet, there were those positivists, like Dennett, who saw the computer as the ultimate truth machine. With all this information to hand, they argued, it would be easy to expose and dispel propaganda, fakery, and lies. But in spite of these claims, the opposite has happened. Logic machines are vulnerable to lairs. Facebook's immune system, for example, allows anomalies to creep in. Certainly, the logic machines of social media cannot stop all fakes, viruses, and contagions, partly because much of this stuff emerges from a deficit or void of data, and also because the cost of weeding everything out doesn't fit with the social media business model.

Whitehead also comes in useful here too. He notes how facts derived at through logic pale in comparison to what he calls aesthetic fact. In his analysis, aesthetic facts are something that logicians cannot cope with. How can logic decipher art, for example? Affecting art isn't logically experienced. Art is felt. Indeed, Whitehead's broader concept of experience is similarly a felt experience. The problem now is that Big Lies are similarly experienced viscerally through social media. Tactically, if you want to spread a lie, start your own Reichstag Fire! This kind of shock event is not a postmodern rabbit hole, down which brutal facts disappear. It's not a fact hidden by ideology either. Shock events create data voids. They allow Big Lies to route round cognitive vetting (machine and human) because they function on these visceral registers as aesthetic facts. They are subcritical not because they are illogical, but because they are extra-logical.

JM: Another element that feeds into the dark refrain of social media are the commercial interests of platforms like Facebook. You analyze how these platforms seek to algorithmically engineer the experience of their users so as to induce profitable behavior. One of Facebook's most effective tools is *Lookalike Audiences*, which uses big data to not only identify but also actively cultivate communities that react to stimuli in the same way. This allows their advertisers to more effectively manipulate these communities and accelerate the virality of their content. The regularization of experience by media technologies has been theorized by a long line of thinkers (from Frankfurt School to Bernard Stiegler), who see it as the cause of political passivity or extremism, cultural decline and disaffection. What do you consider to be the main threats of such affective standardization?

TDS: To answer this one, I need to introduce an important business term that was first introduced to me by a marketing person at Snapchat. They'd contacted me about a possible meeting with some executives to discuss how my work on contagion theory might inform their

strategy for *virality/growth*. I recount what—or what didn't—happen next in the book, but I ended up adopting it throughout the text as a general term for the ways in which user experiences are steered. I was not at all surprised to hear that virality was part of the business lexicon of social media. I was nonetheless intrigued to explore the extent to which the concept had become widely integrated into platform infrastructures as a way to stir up user engagement. Indeed, while a lot of critical attention is often focused on the gathering and processing of big data and subsequent surveillance techniques, I contend that there is no data business without the stirring up of collective user experiences and the cultivation of contagious environments. This is the primary purpose of these platforms.

There are some parallels here with Enzensberger and Smythe's work on the consciousness industries and audience commodities. The difference is that it's not simply the user, but the user experience that becomes the product in virality/growth. Or more precisely, the relational aspects of shared felt experiences. The capture and cultivation of user experience does not produce consciousness or for that matter the unconscious. On the contrary, these platforms stir up and steer the contagions of a collective nonconscious—or the sleepwalker, as I call it.

To understand how virality/growth works, we only need to look at the kind of people employed in the user experience and data teams working for these platforms. You'd expect to find a lot of computer science geeks, however, these 'experience' industries also widely recruit postgrads from areas like social psychology and behavioral science. You can trace these people back to their PhDs which are generally focused on studies of spreading phenomena on social networks, for example, the dispersion of social influence or prosocial and emotional contagion. I make the point in the book that there's been a further shift away from a research interest in

individual behavior (the cognitive user) toward social relations (the sharing of experience) and collective dynamics.

Virality/growth also functions differently to the old consciousness industries insofar as it is experience and not ideology that is the main spreader. In the book, I contrast virality/growth to the old media theories of a created self, like those established by Judith Williamson through Barthes and Lacan. There's no need to uncover the mythologies that are supposed to be hidden in media content anymore or decode the production of an alienated commoditized self. Power is not solely ideological. Virality/growth operates through the sharing of felt experiences spread via an array of technologies, including emojis and other experiments with collective dynamics. What is produced is *the Lookalike*. This is not a digital doppelganger though. It is not a digital representation. It is instead a scalable and temporal collective dynamic that shares the same experiences. So, yes, the problems are still about standardization, passivity, extremism, and disaffection. These platforms are certainly the worst place to do democracy. But this is not the creation of a false self or an ideological false consciousness. The Lookalikes are a nonconscious entrainment of collective experience, reproducing the kind of predictable user habits we were discussing earlier.

JM: You discuss the operations of the dark refrain in terms of immunopolitics, divisive maneuvers that seek to enforce borders between the self and the non-self, us and them, and thus protect the self-identity from the supposedly intruding other. Drawing on Roger Caillois's theory of collective mimesis, you speculate about the ways of overcoming the fear related to the loss of self-identity, which grounds the contagion of the dark refrain and its xenophobia. How can Caillois help us rethink the dangers and potentials of becoming-imperceptible?

TDS: In chapter four, I start to speculate on various ways through which we might confront or move through and past the problems brought about by virality/growth. I refer to experiments with immunology, community, and contagion. Caillois's work is perfect for such an experiment since, as you say, he draws our attention to the perils and possibilities of all out contagion or collective mimesis. There are a series of complex propositions to go through here. To begin with, we need to acknowledge that social media platforms are not at all interested in addressing the immunity problem in computing since it is (a), almost impossible to halt all adversarial incursions, and (b), too costly to even attempt. Indeed, with regard to point (b), immunity is antagonistic to the virality/growth business model.

Secondly, the self-evident and well-publicized outcome of this immunity failure is that these platforms help to spread far-right race hate and violence far and wide. In the book, I look at specific examples like Facebook's role in Myanmar and WhatsApp in Brazil, as well as Trump's tweets.

Caillois's theory of collective mimesis helps to think through a third proposition that which is a fallout from the first two. It asks: what happens if collective mimesis does break out? How can we think of ways to tackle all our contagion and imagine new forms of community that might emerge once this disaster has been played out? This is probably the most speculative the book gets. In short, I use Caillois to continue to argue against approaches in media theory that put the person at the center of their study. In the throes of virality/growth we have to deal with what Caillois observed as the loss of personality following the breakdown of immunity. This is not mass mimicry experienced through mirrors or representational doubling either. The Lookalike is not the same as the so-called data double. The person is missing because what was once foregrounded (the feeling of personality) has, through mass

mimicry, merged with the background. As we discussed earlier, this is not mimicry established through representational mirrors. It is a mimicry of indistinction or what I call speculative mimesis.

So, on one hand, Caillois's perils are grasped in this painful loss of personality, as experienced in, for example, masochistic collective imitation. Caillois looks at insects imitating their surroundings, controlled by a strange spatial lure, we can similarly see how in Nazi immunopolitics, for example, bodily movements and feelings become aligned to an entraining experience. This entrainment of experience is how we end up with Laing's cannon fodder.

On the other hand, and following Roberto Esposito as much as Caillois, we can see how mass mimesis can function as a kind of inoculation. All Nazis need a virus in order to break them out their perpetual desire to become-the-same. This is not a viral metaphor. Nazis death *is* very real. Esposito compares it to autoimmunity. It's final aim, to maintain and perpetuate the mimicry of the same, will ultimately destroy it. What emerges after this mass inoculation is what's interesting to me.

JM: Since the circulation of almost any kind of content is profitable for social networks, the contagion of immunopolitics is supported and enhanced by algorithmic operations. You draw attention to the reluctance of Facebook to regulate this lucrative xenophobia, but also speculate on how to redesign the platform in a way that would not diminish their profits. What do you see as the main elements of a platform that is not structured to spread hate speech and fear, but instead supports the contagion of more enabling contents and affects?

TDS: After all the theorizing in the book, I do try to set out a number of practical proposals. In short, I ask how these platforms can be rewired to encourage speculative mimesis? What

would a radical redesign of the user experience look like? The simple answer would be to introduce media regulation of some kind – top down or bottom up. But with the kind of governments we have, and the deference they pay to people like Zuckerberg, I'm cynical about how that will work. It's not a case of disconnection either. The proposals forwarded to deal with Bolsonaro's contagions of fake news on WhatsApp in 2018 involved curtailing virality by limiting group sizes, etc. In the end, Facebook shut down the app and continues to do so when the Bolsominions get out of hand. But it's like a game of *Whack-a-mole*!

Following the third proposition I mentioned earlier, I speculate on something quite different. In short, we need a serious revival and stirring up of the kind of revolutionary contagions of the last decade, but this time learning from the mistakes and misfortunes of the Arab Spring. This design might also include inoculation as way to deal with race hate or incentives for users who avoid homologous behavior. We could also borrow from the first wave of computer viruses in the 1980s and explore the concept of benevolent contagion again as an alternative to the exemptions of immunology. In the final chapter, I also move on to look at a post-social media landscape and the challenges herein of entanglements with increasingly immersive technologies. Virality/growth is a moving target!

JM: In your book you trace the turn from a more optimistic outlook on our digital futures, perhaps most notably marked by the Arab Spring, to that of the dark refrain with its proliferation of racism, misogyny, and misinformation. In addition to the weaponization of search engine optimization and exploitation of various affordances of social networks that you analyze, the far-right has been also dominating the domain of internet memes. Why do you think the far-right was able to so effectively gain the upper hand over the left leaning politics? Do you maybe see any potentials for assembling of the leftist fictioning machines? Can the

left, in the spirit of Ernesto Laclau's exploration of the positive potentials of populism, somehow take advantage of the digital domain and its post-factual character?

TDS: I think a lot of people on the political left have been left reeling about what's happened since 2008. Who'd have thought that after the catastrophic failure of the banks we'd end up with characters like Trump and Bolsonaro, and Johnson's populist Brexit party. So yes, how can this terrible situation be turned around. The best analysis I've read in recent years is Connolly's small book on aspirational fascism in the US. In a nutshell, the Trump problem is linked to the blue-collar working classes who have been deeply affected by the fallout from the banking collapse. They have felt this recession on a very raw, visceral level. This brutal form of capitalism has suited the likes of Trump who can only really operate on that level himself. There are stark parallels here with the success of the Brexit campaign and its appeals to a fake sense of nationalism opposed to elites and liberals. The left needs to empathize with these outcomes more – to share in the raw feelings and experiences of dislocation from hope. Connolly reasons that the left needs to learn to communicate on these visceral registers. This is because their tendency to intellectualize is lost in the raw sense of resentment felt in these communities. This bitter disposition is better suited to joyful encounters with empty slogans and angry rallies.

So, maybe, as you mention, the left needs some of its own fiction machines to combat this toxic culture. I think these machines could work on an aesthetic level if they can lure a mass audience. No point launching these machines inward. Comedy or music is probably the best way forward as they both operate on this visceral level. Let's face it, part of the appeal of Trump is that his idiocy is very funny. Perhaps an old example to bring up, but the British TV comedy series, *Alf Garnet*, served a similar purpose in the 1960s and 70s. It was written by a

lifelong socialist. Jonny Speight invented this odious racist character whom most people laughed at. Unfortunately, some people laughed with him, but on the whole, the fiction perfectly ridiculed racist, bigoted opinions and rendered them more passive and laughable. Today, Alf Garnet most probably wouldn't make it onto television, but something along these lines, memes, viral videos maybe, dotted throughout digital media cultures, may. I'm not sure how successful such a campaign would be though.

JM: Contagion and virality are concepts that are central to the time of COVID-19. Can theories of social contagion help us understand the response to, and the cultural effects of, the corona-virus pandemic? Can this biological contagion, conversely, in any way allow us to rethink our understanding of social contagion?

TDS: There's been a steady stream of theorists trying to come up with something hasty yet profound, concerning this moment we are all caught up in. It was difficult not to get caught up in this rush to publish. I wrote a very short piece with Jussi Parikka around March at the height of the lockdown. Obviously, our previous work on digital contagion and virality had prompted a few enquiries. The piece we wrote for the French journal AOC is purposefully cautious, I think. We had a discussion about the problems that might arise from getting caught up in the rush. Simply put, we all need time to critically digest these huge events rather than just make hasty responses in the moment.

I read one comment on this piece that mentioned the problem of applying the viral metaphor to everything that's going on. I've always been very wary of reverting back to viral metaphors. From the outset, my position has always been to disentangle social contagion from the metaphors of biological viruses. Virality was never supposed to be *like* a virus. What's

changed now, for all those commentators who saw viral culture as metaphorical, is that Covid-19 is no metaphor. Along these lines, in the AOC article we started to think through the contagious looping that seems to have occurred through Covid-19. In this initial context, we meant how panic buying and the spreading of crazy conspiracy theories get caught up in the spreading of the biological virus. This does not mean that panic and conspiracy obey the same laws or mechanisms as the virus, but they do appear to follow a co-patterning or looping function. We have now expanded on this idea of contagion loops, so hopefully something a bit more substantial and reflective will come out in the near future on viral cultures.

We also need to challenge a fictional account of Covid-19 that contends that the virus does not discern between class and race. We have heard the mantra in the mainstream media that it's just as easy for Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro, or the British and Saudi Royal Families to catch the virus as it is anyone else. The reality is that the virus affects the underprivileged, and particularly underprivileged BAME communities in a far harsher and deadlier way. There was no access to testing or PPE. No protection of care workers or indeed those in care.

A final point to make is that the pandemic has led to some obvious questioning of fairly dominant biopolitical theories. We simply can't describe what's happening now as just another example of biopolitics in action. Some of these loops we are following are co-determined by the virus. The tens of thousands of epidemiological simulations that produce the curves that determine population movement are biopolitical, of course, but we are also seeing how political decision-making can be blown off course by the virus. To some extent, then, we might say that viruses and the ensuing shutdowns are antagonistic to capitalism. Nevertheless, what is more concerning perhaps is a new kind of corporate response emerging after lockdown, which is using the realities of the virus to restructure systems of work and lay off millions of workers.

The IT corporations are all over this reconfiguring of work. Companies like Amazon will continue to expand into every corner of life after lockdown.

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