In Pursuit of an 'Ethos of Community': Postdigital Education in the Age of Covid-19

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In Search of Global Ethics

On April 4, 2020, the government of the People's Republic of China instituted a nationwide day of remembrance for the over 3300 patients, nurses, and doctors—who have perished (within China) as a result of the global viral pandemic known as Covid-19 (Collier 2020). As the virus begins to subside, and the government readies the dismantling of its 'lockdown' brand of aggressive social distancing, this display of collective mourning represents a moment of somber reflection—not only in grief for recently departed loved ones, but also in respect to the many fallen heroes—'martyrs' who in sacrificing everything helped contain the spread of Covid-19 to its epicenter in Wuhan (Connelly 2020). However, while new studies are highlighting how China was able to successfully 'flatten the curve' (Lee 2020), many countries, like the USA, Italy, and Spain, continue to suffer tremendous losses as their governments fail to act decisively under the full weight of Covid-19 (Trofimov 2020; Peters et al. 2020b). While China has gone to great lengths to fill the gap in leadership left by the US' retreat into an 'America First' foreign policy (The White House 2018) marked by protectionism, anti-globalism, and national populism (Miller-Idriss 2019; Peters 2019a), it has also allowed itself to get caught-up in a battle of disinformation with the USA going tit-for-tat with the Trump administration's 'alternative-facts-based' propaganda machine (Finnegan 2020). This unsightly bickering has unfortunately allowed Trump's brand of anti-globalist post-truth populism to hold sway over the inclusive cosmopolitan aims of Chinese internationalism (Green 2020a, b).

During this collective moment of unavoidable global engagement with the 'world risk society' of second modernity (Beck and Grande 2010), it seems a prescient task to

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reassess the notion of ‘ethical universalism’. Specifically, it remains unclear whether the current climate of global risk-cum-openness and co(labor)ation can transform the prevailing Kantian flat universalism towards an *ethos of community*. In the following excerpt, Peters weighs the perils of essentializing universalism against the need for a social ontology based in global ethics:

In every case that purports a universalism, we must subject it to severe intellectual tests and make sure that it is not simply the cultural projection of the dominant power. This is an ethical and political obligation of all thinkers, especially those of the ‘imperial’ west. On the other hand, I am interested in the evolutionary rationality that develops as a form of globalism which moves us closer to a set of values that might provide a global ethics of the environment and of the other (Peters and Jandrić 2018a: 271).

Thusly, this article outlines a framework for the critical social ontology—*ethos of community*, which according to Peters (2020a, b)—is needed to unite the global community in the fight against Covid-19.

Ethical Imperative as Moral Opportunity: the Knowledge Cultures of *homo collaborans*

Peters’ *ethos of community* contains an ethical imperative which is overwhelmingly imbued with the notions of collective community responsibility, care for the ‘other,’ and sacrifice for the greater good (Peters 2020a, b). This ethical imperative turned ‘moral opportunity’ may be highlighted by China’s current mobilization around the fight against Covid-19. In its development of a heretofore unprecedented form of ‘risk community/cosmopolitan solidarity’ (Beck 2013), China has effectively seized the moral opportunity provided by the current moment of crisis-cum-openness as highlighted by Beck and Grande (2010). Specifically, China has contributed both material resources such as testing kits, masks, monetary donations, and medical personnel (Moritsugu 2020; Kuo 2020), as well as cognitive resources such as open-source scientific research relating to testing, prevention, and the development of a Covid-19 vaccine (Peters et al. 2020). However, these efforts have been labeled by some as merely an attempt by China to make up for a ‘botched initial response’—the censorship of doctors, which made the spread far worse than it might have been (Fuchs 2020). While this critique may very well hold water, the USA and China both have been spreading unfounded conspiracy theories as part of a ‘weaponization’ (Peters et al. 2020) of Covid-19 for political ends—resulting in a climate of anti-Chinese racism and xenophobia in the US and an increased anti-foreign nationalist sentiment in China (Fuchs 2020; Kuo and Davidson 2020).

As a result of this alarming trend, the United Nations (UN) put forward a resolution which calls for a form of international cooperation and multilateralism which opposes any form of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination in the fight against Covid-19 (Associated Press 2020). What the UN is calling for is the creation of a cosmopolitan ‘global risk community’—wherein actors construct bonds of mutual commitment and reciprocity across borders through public discourse, sociopolitical struggle, and global

social action (Beck 2013). Thusly, during this time of crisis, what is needed is an unprecedented level of open collaboration—a global concerted effort towards the eradication of Covid-19. At this moment of the fight, China represents an important risk community that possesses not only the material resources and cognitive expertise to stop this pandemic, but most importantly, it is exhibiting a much-needed willingness to engage in a transnational ‘praxis’ of cosmopolitan solidarity.

The developing risk community within China exhibits an antithetical disregard for the power relationship between the production of material goods and the production of knowledge (excludability, rivalry, scarcity), reflecting a transgression of the foundational tenets of the knowledge economy *as* knowledge capitalism (Peters et al. 2018; Peters 2019b). China’s risk community-cum-cosmopolitan-solidarity may also represent a new form of ‘knowledge cultures’ which exists outside the notion of cognitive capitalism. Specifically, while cognitive capitalism reifies a traditional human capital-based (individuality, rationality, self-interest) concept of *homo economicus* (Peters and Jandrić 2018b), the concept of knowledge cultures underlines a conception of collective intelligence and co(labor)ation which introduces fundamental changes to the production and dissemination of knowledge, i.e., crowd wisdom and the post-digital figure of *homo collaborans* (Peters et al. 2018).

However, as the ‘post’ in postmodern reflects an era, concepts, mediums philosophies, etc., which failed to altogether extricate themselves from or improve completely upon their modern connotations, so too does the ‘post’ in postdigital (Jandrić et al. 2018). Moreover, the concept of ‘the postdigital’ reflects a contemporary human relationship to a digital paradigm that has lost its early sheen of openness, democracy and user-friendliness to a haze of bias, discrimination and inequality (Jandrić et al. 2018). Notwithstanding, in the postdigital age, this problematic notion of crowd wisdom may still yet warrant a hopeful association with the notion of collective intelligence. Specifically, this hopefulness is rooted to an understanding that technology has created new networks of research, sharing, and collaboration, based in the logic that solutions to global problems are better solved through the democratic engagement of people who are well-informed and therefore less-biased in their collective group-thought (Peters and Jandrić 2018b).

The Dialectic of Digital Openness: Knowledge Socialism and Post-Truth Populism

Inherent to the spaces of openness created by the continued global risk embedded within second modernity, moments of risk also breed conflict, violence, and competition (Beck and Grande 2010). These instances of competition are clearly witnessed within the USA and China’s continued jockeying over global leadership positioning. Moreover, as the global death toll continues to rise, the USA and China compete over who has contributed more to the global fight against Covid-19, who is the more responsible leader, and finally, who represents the better ‘partner’ in the global response to Covid-19 (Finnegan 2020). Embedded within this digital ‘clash of civilizations’ discourse, played out over tweets by government officials who claim ‘#truth’ as they retweet unverifiable conspiracy theories to the masses (Mu 2020), lies the very analog desire to cement the boundaries between *us* and *them*. This belies the notion that as

technology and globalization continue to transnationalize and deterritorialize our increasingly mobile identities, social, cultural, and political identities continue to represent retrenched forms of group identity that separate *us* from *them* (Delanty 2006a; Green 2020a, b, forthcoming 2020c).

Furthermore, the zombification of well-worn forms of ‘exclusive differentiation’ (Beck 2006) have begun to reanimate within the panic and fear of post-digital pandemic virality. This notion is brought home by the recent declaration by US Senator Martha McSally, who in a pantomime of 1950’s red scare McCarthyism, readily evoked the specter of communism when referring to official Chinese health experts. Specifically, when questioned by Fox News regarding China’s release of official Covid-19 figures, the Senator stated, ‘I never trusted a Communist’ (Calicchio 2020). Once again, within the postdigital framework of Peters’ (2020a, b) ethos of community, this viral pandemic represents a ‘moral opportunity’ for people to find themselves within the struggle and sacrifice for the greater good. However, this pandemic has also highlighted the mortal dangers inherent to a form of decentralized, non-hierarchical, and peer-governed ‘digital socialism’ (peer production, collective intelligence) which has enabled and contributed to the legitimization of racist/xenophobic discourses and narratives created within the current era of post-truth populism (Burke and Carolissen 2018; Peters 2020b). Post-truth populism can be best described as follows:

So (sic) post-truth populism is a form of authoritarian politics in which ‘folksy or fiery leaders’ make appeals to emotion and personal belief, eschewing objective fact, all in the name of ‘ordinary people’. In concert with racism and xenophobia, it is often used to gin up fear and hatred of the racialized ‘other’ (Burke and Carolissen 2018).

The political economy of viral modernity, which allowed Trump’s victory in 2016, a victory of mendacity over veritas, values consumerism over empirical evidence while utilizing a logic that is concerned primarily with emotionally charged group-think rather than a traditional concern for ethics (Besley et al. 2018). Moreover, Mumford highlights how the continued progress of technology represents a dialectic process of democratic/authoritarian interaction which prompts users and social groups to innovate both ‘democratic technics’—as digital openness and collaboration, as well as ‘authoritarian technics’—as the pursuit of social, political, and economic authority (May 2008). While democratic technics have the potential to democratize the postdigital economy, by enabling new forms of technological openness, institutions and governments have increasingly utilized authoritarian technics to surveil, propagandize and suppress free speech (Peters 2020a, b).

Framed within a US climate of political crisis, the work of Peters and Chiang (2017), while outlining China’s continued commitment to the liberal openness of market cosmopolitanism, highlights the Trump-era diffusion of authoritarian technics as a means for replacing critical thought with docile ‘patriotic’ nationalism (2019). However, while China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remain on the forefront of cosmopolitan hospitality (Green 2020a, b, forthcoming 2020c), its utilization of authoritarian technics, i.e., digital authoritarianism, as a means of surveillance, censorship and political repression, has quickly become a model for the non-democratic world (Feldstein 2020). Within this dialectic of openness as both democratic and

authoritarian, collaborative and competitive, opportunity and danger—an important question begins to materialize. As a global society at risk, within a viral modernity which inhabits both the wisdom of collective intelligence and the emotionally charged folly of decentralized/peer to peer group-think, how should we foment the development of Peters’ transnational imperative of ethical universalism—*ethos of community*?

The Centrality of Education: Developing a Community of Inquiry and Ethic of Criticism

In brief, Kant’s ‘kingdom of ends’ represents an idealized ethical community, i.e., ‘a systematized union’ of rational actors under common moral laws (Johnson and Cureton 2019). Communitarians have argued that the notion of a Kantian ethical community represents nothing more than an atomistic, ethicized ‘aloof harmony of separate individual wills ...abstracted from human society’ (Moore 1992). While this may be the case, Moore (1992) believes that a less pessimistic interpretation of Kant’s kingdom of ends highlights a notion of the ethical community as replete with idealized postulates such as unity, harmony, communal intention, interest in other members, internal bonds, reciprocity, and communal identity. Moreover, these ethical postulates represent a moral task or obligation towards action—positioning the ethical community as a legitimate object of human hope and striving (Moore 1992). In searching for an ethical universalism founded in both a community of inquiry and ethic of criticism, Peters (2013) outlines a critical social ontology which is able to both diagnose the pathologies of modern society while illuminating and enhancing a common interest based in co(labor)ative/collective-intentional ends—a mutual freedom from the reification of cognitive capitalism’s power/domination-based hierarchical ends (Thompson 2017).

Specifically, this community of ethical criticism reflects a Delantian imaginary of cosmopolitan modernity, i.e., multiple and overlapping ‘plural’ modernities which represent a constant state of self-problemitization and incompleteness (Delanty 2006b). This community of ethical critique therefore inhabits both Kant and Boudelaire’s view of modernity not as doctrine, attitude or epoch, but as a mode of relating to contemporary reality—a philosophical ethos or ‘spirit’ of permanent self-reflexive critique within our given historical era (Gaonkar 1999; Green 2020a, b). Moreover, representing more than just a philosophical search, Peters’ *ethos of community* contains the aim of fomenting a community of inquiry founded in an ethics of criticism.

Highlighting the means by which societies can establish a critical social ontology based in an *ethos of community*, Giroux argues for the importance of education, in all its various forms (Giroux 2018). His argument is as follows:

[Education]...when linked to the ongoing project of democratization can provide opportunities for educators, students, and others to redefine and transform the connections among language, desire, meaning, everyday life, and material relations of power as part of a broader social movement to reclaim the promise and possibilities of a democratic public life... Students need to be inspired and energized to address important social issues, learning to narrate their private

troubles as public issues, and to engage in forms of resistance that are both local and collective, while connecting such struggles to more global issues. (Giroux 2018)

Giroux's argument rests in the positioning of education as a democratic sphere for the development of discourses and pedagogical practices to enhance the capacities of critical, knowledgeable, and informed young people as agents of hope and possibility (Giroux 2018). Within the postdigital climate of ideologically bounded and increasingly retrenched forms of identity politics, education stands as a means for the creation of critical communities of ethical criticism. In other words, an education founded in a community of ethical critique provides a framework for a system of postdigital collective education.

Such a system would possess the means of establishing what Jandrić (2019) calls the postdigital trialectic of collective intelligence, i.e., 'we-think,' 'we learn,' and 'we act.' This trialectic represents a coalition of praxis based in co-constructed knowledge and methodologies, aimed at overcoming the inherent challenges to a postdigital society marked by social division, multiple discourses and impaired democracy (Jandrić 2019). Thusly, by instilling young people with the ability to critique a form of modernity rooted in a deontological knowledge economy based in individualistic rationality, e.g., post-truth populist narratives of xenophobic patriotism/nationalism—an *ethos of community* lays the foundation for a postdigital critical social ontology. This critical social ontology provides a sustainable means by which our current postdigital global risk society may engender an open system of education based in self-reflexive democratic collective intelligence.

Radical Openness as a Framework for Empathy and Love

Within Peters' search for a theory of viral post-truth ethical universalism, conceptualized by the *ethos of community* framework, lies the notion of radical openness 'a state of mind which entails a willingness to surrender preconceptions of how the world should be in order to adapt to an ever-changing environment' (Codd and Craighead 2018). Inherent to this notion of radical openness is the understanding that the prerequisite for a healthy world necessitates the formulation of an *ethos of community* built upon empathy (Peters 2020a, b). The empathy inherent to radical openness is also present within the notion of cosmopolitan empathy, wherein the practice of 'exclusive differentiation is cast aside in favor of a 'logic of inclusive oppositions'—a cosmopolitan vision which extends our capacity to perceive, in a more sensitive way, the lives of others as both different from our own yet equally fated together within the crises of second modernity (Beck 2006; Beck and Grande 2010; Bielsa and Hermans 2016). Furthermore, central to the notion of empathy is the concept of 'shared feelings' as a challenge to epistemological individualism, reflected by Schmid's central claim that plural self-awareness can clarify a sense of *us* into an understanding of *ours*—an experiential fusion of the plural *self* (Zahavi 2018). Schmid's phenomenal fusion of shared experience/consciousness allows for interpersonal difference, though not between subjects, but rather as different parts of a unified whole (Zahavi 2018). The individually felt yet collectively experienced phenomenon of 'shared feeling' is further elaborated within this excerpt:

In the case of shared feelings—shared grief, worries, and joys—there is a sense in which it is simply not the case that ‘I can’t really know how you feel’, because my feeling is your feeling, or rather: my feeling isn’t really mine, and yours isn’t yours, but ours. Shared feelings are conscious experiences whose subjective aspect is not singular (‘for me’), but plural (‘for us’): it is plural self-awareness of a shared affective concern (Schmid 2014).

Finally, as reflected by the title of his latest work, ‘Love and social distancing in the time of Covid-19’ (Peters 2020b), it is clear that Peters’ *ethos of community* connotes a radical openness of self that reflects not just cognitive understanding or emotional empathy but a concern for the Kantian notion of love and respect as the foundational moral laws which govern humanity (Wagoner 1997). For Peters (2020b), individualistic acts of selfishness and competitiveness, i.e., trips to the beach, and the hoarding of toilet paper, etc., represent an irrational form of romantic ‘lovesickness.’ In lieu of the fleeting pleasures inherent to selfish acts of romantic love, individual sacrifice and collective rationality (exhibited by those who practice social distancing and hand washing) represents a practice of moral love based in virtuous filial dedication to those 70+ who are most at risk (Peters 2020a, b). This form of sacrificial moral love highlights man’s ability to rise above himself for the benefit of the collective good, highlighting how love and respect can affect a harmonious symbiosis between the *self* and *other* as *us*. Lastly, the concept of mutual love and respect inherent to radical openness within an *ethos of community* can be expressed as follows: ‘These two concerns—for self and other—are not competing; in fact, they are intertwined harmoniously. Our individual progress benefits the world and others, and our care for the world and others opens our own minds and hearts.’ (Kongtrul 2018: 2).

This framework of love and respect for *self* and *other* as sacrifice and collective rationality is found throughout Peters’ theory of knowledge socialism (Peters 2019b; Peters et al. forthcoming 2020). Specifically, within the concept of knowledge socialism lies the concept of education as an ‘open commons’ wherein the value of knowledge is no longer based on scarcity or competition. Within a knowledge cultures founded in a sociopolitical economy of knowledge socialism, the value of knowledge lies both in its relation to the greater good, as well as its ability to create far-reaching benefits for both producer and consumer (Peters 2019b). Within this framework, the *ethos of community* is reflected by a harmonized relationship between the self and other. The *ethos of community* reflects an alternative rationalization of progress within overlapping and intimately fated cosmopolitan modernities, where global risk communities promote a form of postdigital education grounded in the constant search for democratic, ethical, and self-reflexive collective intelligence towards securing the greater good.

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