Affectivity, subjectivity, and vulnerability: on the new forces of mass hysteria

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Abstract

Affect theory raises greater awareness of non-representational forces in social life that can shape different levels of subjectivity in ways that may not be immediately known to the subjects. In outbreaks of mass hysteria when subjects are suddenly exposed to bizarre and extreme behaviors, the question of affect becomes a key to understanding how their subjectivity is impacted by situations that seemingly slip immediate control. Hysterical subjectivity occurs not from unconscious forces but from affective contagions spreading throughout network assemblages. These are flows of fear and conflict that with non-conscious influences constitute the new forces of mass encounters. In these encounters, micro-flows of imitation are automatized by various assemblages of intention and action to produce repeatable contagions of affects and behaviors. The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the power of these flows as facilitating a global affectivity of mass hysteria. It is an affectivity in which imitation takes on a central role as technology of the social for the behavioral control of mass populations. Ubiquitous mask-wearing in the pandemic is not only seen as a prophylactic against viral infection but also intended as a mandated form of mimicry for propagating the new politics of virality. These are politics that empower fear as an agent of cascading contagions paralyzing social, cultural, and economic life around the world.

Keywords Affect · Contagion · Control · COVID-19 · Imitation · Mass hysteria

Introduction

The advent of affect theory has put the spotlight on atmospherics, feelings, intensities, moods, and generally the non-representational aspects of our daily experiences as the principal shapers of many social and cultural relationships. Starting with one of the key texts, affect is considered difficult to pin down (Thrift 2008, p. 175) but

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at the same time, it can be described as the 'self-referential stakes of being' that are 'not easily separated off from either emotion or drive' (p. 221). What this means is that our subjective experiences and actions are almost never as overt as we think because we exist and relate in spaces that cannot always be fully direct and thus the indirect comes to exert considerable influence as 'models of action-at-a-distance' (p. 230). In this paradigm of covert transmissions and influences, the precognitive is given more priority than the way the rational is often implicated in the conduct of human affairs. As Gibbs (2010, p. 200) argues, we cannot really refer this conduct to pure cognition (or rationality) without equally addressing the importance of 'the richness of sensate experience, including affective experience.' By focusing on such experiences, it is plausible to theorize affect as not just something that passes from body to body but also as 'a non-conscious *force of encounter*' (Sampson, 2020a, p. 4). However, this is not simply a force that 'rubs off' on people since it can be instrumentally employed to guide intentions before they crystallize into consciousness (p. 9).

But why guide intentions in widely technologized environments within the context of a globalized neoliberalism? This is a question that needs to be asked because the role of affect in social and cultural life cannot even be properly considered unless we give special attention to the dialogues on 'the parameters of what currently circulates and is enacted via the affective turn and its distinctive markers and characteristics' (Blackman 2014, p. 364). What currently circulates can be identified as the 'parameters set out by the neoliberal capitalist orthodoxy [that] has plunged the majority of the world's population into a situation of social and economic insecurity' (Featherstone 2017, p. 3). In this climate of deepening insecurity, especially in the wake of 9/11 attacks on the US citadels of power, affectivity cannot be seen to be immune to the widespread predilection for a form of security that promulgates 'absolute lockdown and limitation of creativity and imagination' (ibid). To instill the lockdown solution may only forestall an acceptance of unavoidable vulnerability and at the same time produce a paradox where under the aegis of neoliberal capitalism, subjects come to experience a repressed subjectivity that can undermine their economic instrumentality. In other words, affectivity in an era of increasing securitization may be ramifying into the new forces of mass hysteria marked by spiraling fears, unfathomable contradictions, and authoritarian controls that will only continue the endless search for immunity without fully sidestepping our exposure to new aporias. Thus, the economic instrumentality generated from the workings of neoliberal capitalist orthodoxy can be considered as being transformed into a vehicle for a new hysterical subjectivity that will eventually disfigure or refigure economic value. In a world that is set up by recurring definitions of new unseen threats, the lockdown solution (currently posed as the answer to containing the COVID-19 pandemic) may in fact be reversing the commoditizing and profiteering drive of neoliberal capitalism into an implosive sphere of debt and recession where economy is held to ransom by the contagions of fear and loathing.

These contagions that are fuelling global pandemonium, through a viral metaphor and its seemingly unending variants, may be treated as ramifying from a 'new market subjectivity' that supports a form of individualism which 'is fated to a life of endless work, terminal consumerism, and eventual burnout and exhaustion … [while

hiding] behind its techno-scientific computational esthetic that suggests objectiv-
ity, neutrality, and the impossibility of alternatives' (Featherstone 2017, p. 82).
However, maintenance of this neoliberal individualism cannot be fully guaranteed
because the new market subjectivity itself continues to be a source of instability;
thus making it necessary to outsource its maintenance to 'the modernisation of the
south … that further condemns human subjectivity to marginality, meaninglessness,
and transformation into waste' (ibid, p. 83). It is therefore plausible to argue that the
dehumanized subjectivity of the south may now be a reversed crisis of the north—its
transposed modernization to the south being the conduit for a new hysterical subjec-
tivity that is posing aporetic conditions for neoliberal growth and expansion.

The significance of affect in this situation of exported modernization now boo-
meranging as a viral pandemonium can arguably be regarded as contiguous with
'automaticity research' that highlights 'how we can be moved and made to move by
our conjoining with human and non-human others' (Blackman 2014, p. 377). This
would be an 'experience of relations' or the 'trans-subjective ontology of subjectiv-
ity' (ibid, pp. 368, 380) where there is no necessity to theorize conditions of inter-
nalized dispositions and operations. It could conveniently lead to fresh understand-
ings of collective behavior, such as mass hysteria, as it is 'brought into dialogue
with explicitly contemporary concerns' and especially 'with how communication is
intensified and spreads within networked populations' (ibid, p. 365). In this situation
of modernizing linkages (or outsourced modernization) between north and south,
the spread of mass hysteria implies an automaticity of networked virality moving
rapidly and relentlessly in affective patterns that thrive on fear, conflict, and an unre-
strained need for control dovetailing with the 'contemporary obsession with security
[folding] into a careless totalitarianism' (Featherstone 2017, p. 11). But it is within
the growth of this totalitarianism that we can also come to decipher how the spread
of mass hysteria via these modernizing linkages may actually be 'one of the bases of
the technology of the social through which [masses] are governed' (Blackman and
Walkerdine 2001, p. 187). Use of this technology in emerging totalitarian environ-
ments can therefore be considered a means of organizing panic outbreaks in which
hysterical subjectivity is produced through non-conscious forces of intermediated
encounters, where subjects 'can be made to do things that they experience as being
consciously willed … which confounds their own sense of agency and control'
(Blackman 2014, p. 377).

The task at hand is a reconceptualization of mass hysteria not just as a case of
social and cultural labelling in which 'crowd emotions … and the spontaneous
actions of ordinary people are forever pathologized' (Blackman and Walkerdine
2001, p. 189), but more critically as an instance of affective automaticity where
observations of 'overwhelming affect on the loose and out of control' (Gibbs 2008,
p. 131) may coincidentally be tied to forms of subjectivity control. Here, we can
reiterate the contention made by Blackman and Walkerdine (op. cit.) that 'Ordinary
people are not made in the image of the autonomous psychological subject: they are
to become it.' Similarly, we can pose hysterical subjectivity as not merely produced
to fit a conventional understanding of the abnormal psychological subject but made
to be part of a larger framework of social and political control. To argue this point is
also to adumbrate how mass hysteria is manufactured under authoritarian conditions

in which bizarre, outlandish collective behavior can result from an organized shaping of hysterical subjectivity. It implies that subjects may act as if they are in conscious control of their minds and bodies, yet they are not fully aware of or sensitive to the multiple stimuli that constitute interpersonal contagions passing 'through the skin of each individual' (Sampson 2012, p. 86). Lacking this sensitivity as well as reflexivity, subjects readily become vulnerable to 'non-conscious entanglements and assemblages' that can exert less visible influences 'through non-conscious activity, and … through this capacity for unawareness' (Lara et al. 2017, p. 37). The framework for approaching contagions as central to collective behavior comes from Gabriel Tarde's theory of imitation (1903) that argues for the 'capricious minutia of micro-relations' that can result in 'mostly unconscious associations and oppositional forces of imitative social encounter' (Sampson 2012, p. 18). Yet in accounting for these micro-relational forces, there is also a need for looking at how these forces can be steered under certain conditions to shape subjectivity for the accomplishment of social and political goals.

From this angle, mass hysteria is ripe for deconstruction as a form of 'theater of the absurd' in which affect and subjectivity become routinized as part of a larger tableau of terror control. In particular, this routinization may be applied to an analysis of the COVID-19 crisis in which the sudden proclamation of a viral pandemic in early 2020 became the basis of a worldwide panic morphing into global mass hysteria, the likes of which have not been seen before. It signals an urgent need to approach the question of affect and subjectivity in a pandemic not just as a concern with the management of public health but more vitally as 'a mode of critical inquiry of … the non-conscious, and identity, and *politicizing affect* through an attention to form, ontology and practice' (ibid) in rapidly occurring contagions that stop at no boundaries around the world.[1]

The making of mass hysteria

First, the argument to be set forth here concerns outbreaks of mass hysteria as a problem of mass psychology, a conceptualization of collective abnormality or unusual, non-routine behavior that occurs spontaneously in situations of unresolved conflict, or circumstances brimming with the uncertainty of emerging threats. The literature on mass hysteria produced in the second half of the last century covered a vast territory from the modern north to the modernizing south.[2] It mostly reported

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[1] Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, writings covering different aspects of the crisis have grown by leaps and bounds. It would be redundant to summarize this extensive literature (e.g., Brubaker 2021; Delanty 2021; Levy 2020; Žižek 2020a, 2020b; Zinn 2021) as the focus here is not on these aspects such as economy, epidemiology, philosophy, psychiatry, and public health, but on the implications of viral contagion in a world that has not only become a global village but also an enormous cauldron for churning out massive admixtures of affect and subjectivity to pose an even greater problem of interconnecting epidemics than the virulent epidemics observed in previous eras.

[2] This literature has become massive over the last half century and can be found in publications appearing in medical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, psychiatric, and public health journals. It

on puzzling collective phenomena ranging from mass delusions to ritual enactment of peculiar behaviors such as dancing manias. These reports tended to emphasize the bases of psychopathological subjectivity as causing these outbreaks. Such subjectivity, however, was not necessarily conceived of as leading to various forms of madness but more likely as an outcome of 'conversion reactions' where 'the subject in a tension state … escapes by "converting" the tension to some sort of symptom' (Lemkau 1973, p. 1). Collectively, these conversion reactions were seen to translate into hysterical epidemics in which certain ideas and practices gained acceptance and spread rapidly among a population but might die out after a certain period. But there were also instances where such reactions became 'built into traditional, often religious, practices … such as healing cults [and] various types of feasts, from pagan orgies to Mardi Gras' (ibid, pp. 2–3).

As a psychiatrist, Lemkau's diagnosis of hysterical epidemics was not unexpectedly focused on the spread of behavioral disorder traceable to symptoms that 'once cured also often tended to appear again at some later period' (ibid). But his broad review of such epidemics—ranging from the dancing manias of the Middle Ages (Hecker 1864) to modern panics triggered by a radio broadcast of a fictional Martian invasion (Cantril 1940), by fears of a phantom gasser in rural America (Johnson 1945) and of a mysterious slasher in Taiwan (Jacobs 1965), and a polio epidemic in Blackburn, England (Moss and McEvedy 1966)—also did not fail to address the 'imitative fashion' in which 'emotional and ideational waves can engulf populations as they have in the past' (p. 13). Imitation is considered central to these outbreaks because it 'can be a most "catching" phenomenon which can run through a sufficient proportion of the population and eventually dominate the whole' (ibid). Catching in this sense would imply cascading behavioral contagion in which subjects might be unconsciously or non-consciously influenced by the conduct and thoughts of others in situations of close contact. What is contagious then is not just a disease or a perception but the behavioral disorder associated with 'pathologically emotionally laden concepts forming a part of the philosophical base upon which the society is operating' (ibid). In other words, the contagion could not be readily differentiated from the affective milieu which was also regarded as the source of the apparent disorder.

This form of circular reasoning worked well with researchers who wanted to treat mass hysteria as behavioral manifestations originating from particular emotional states and becoming contagious via proximal relationships in settings that required frequent or intensive interactions such as in schools, factories, and neighborhoods. However, an approach utilizing sociological concepts rather than psychological or psychiatric ones represented the attempt to replace internal emotional states with role-playing or performance in conditions where mass conformity to new norms governing the display of non-usual behavior was considered 'appropriate in an

Footnote 2 (continued)

would seem an enormous task to cite all or most of these works, although one could find an almost complete list in a not-so-recent review by Bartholomew (1990).

otherwise ambiguous situation' (Gehlen 1977, p. 33). Hence, it was plausible to shift the focus on conversion reactions turning into collective manias and hysterical outbreaks to performative behaviors that paralleled actions observed in crazes where 'the wish fulfillment belief would be that conformity would lead to the positive result of increased group acceptance' (ibid, p. 34). By discarding the need to generalize internal states, researchers could now place closer attention to the environmental state of rapidly spreading symptoms, which are none other than the products of imitation for the sake of meeting new group expectations. Mass hysteria would in this case be considered as neither psychopathological nor socially deviant but an alternative form of group conformity that either delivered benefits to its members or provided them with the means to lessen the ambiguities of a new situation.

In these reviews, a consensus emerged on the importance of collective imitation as a principal characteristic of mass hysteria being 'filtered through culturally ascribed symbol systems' (Bartholomew 1990, p. 456). By highlighting acts of imitation in hysterical episodes, it became only logical to arrive at the conclusion that the concept of mass hysteria was itself 'a social fabrication of objectivists … a form of mystification, detracting attention from the social patterning of episodes' (ibid, pp. 468–69). This social patterning would not be considered as something abnormal or deviant but more appropriately as forms of '*collective exaggerated emotions …* which became self-fulfilling … as they involve arbitrary social constructions, limited only by plausibility' (ibid, p. 474). Shifting to the idea of exaggerated emotions in collectivities raises two questions on the nature of mass hysteria. Firstly, blown-up emotions observed as though they were 'out of whack' point to a form of behavioral overdrive which is no longer under subjective control. But if control is lost, how is it possible that such subjectivity manifesting as peculiar gestures and speech becomes a pattern of collective repetition as if its automaticity requires a conductor? In short, is such subjectivity not fully unconscious but only non-conscious[3] to suggest a type of control made to look as if subjects were mimicking others without being fully conscious? Secondly, if it is imitation that prompts exaggerated emotions, would that render mass hysteria an expected outcome of network culture where the network itself 'induces mass replication on a miniaturized scale' (Parikka 2007, p. 290)? It implies that mass hysteria in the form of exaggerated emotions might be more common than we think because these displays could be treated as 'a more systematic quality of individuation, of turbulence that can be taken in different directions' (ibid, p. 300).

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[3] The idea of the non-conscious refers to a state that is neither fully conscious nor fully unconscious but allows subjectivity to work in a manner which 'connects the self-contained ego to the exteriority of the body … wherein the spreading of desire occurs not beneath consciousness but at the surface of the social encounter' (Sampson 2012, pp. 63–4). A surface encounter suggests that bodies can quite simply become oriented or entrained to feelings before thought takes over, or as Sampson (2016, p. 57)—quoting Aldous Huxley (2007)—puts it, 'It is the gut-brain that hears … [the] recurring harmonies and repetitive words … before they infect the mind.' Therefore, an entrainment of thought would imply a non-conscious state unfolding into a 'false consciousness' whereby the recurring thoughts imagined to be autonomous are obscured from the original feelings of the encounter (also see Brennan 2004). This is possibly what Blackman (2014, p. 377) suggests by referring to the idea of 'priming' as a technique for modulating feelings and thoughts that are experienced as if the subject were in direct control.

These questions therefore take us in a different direction to re-construe mass hysteria not merely as imitation en masse but as a type of subjectivity under siege where 'the subject is seemingly deterministically produced through forces of affect that leave no room for spaces of resistance' (Lara et al. 2017, p. 34). There is lack of resistance because hysterical subjectivity is occasioned by assemblages of control that set up conditions to generate forces of repetition at a non-conscious level which can weaken awareness and the will to counter-imitate. Mass hysteria happens because it is meant to happen through organized perspectives of a crisis situation. The objective here is to argue for a re-depiction of mass hysteria as a type of organized breakdown of routine behaviors, where subjectivity is exposed to affective contagions that could ultimately take on an appearance of regimented behavioral manifestations. This approach would suggest that the vulnerability of subjectivity to remote manipulations of situational definitions becomes even greater as world populations are laid bare to the politicizing affect of enforced imitations. References to the COVID-19 crisis as global mass hysteria may provide plausible guideposts to understanding how subjectivity is modulated and manipulated in a world facing extreme insecurity.

Subjectivity under siege

One of the most significant observations made toward the end of the last century concerned the fragmentation of modernity where the emergence of a postmodern condition signaled the end of perceived stability based on an anchoring of 'grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984). The world as it was came to be seen as a patchwork of words and speeches that only arbitrarily gave rise to constructed edifices of totalistic realities. Critique of these realities also constituted a means of reintroducing uncertainty into all aspects of social and cultural life. In the postmodern era, one no longer expected social reality to be holistically coherent but rather to be schizophrenically derived; a situation which only made uncertainty a certain fact of life. This recovered view of uncertainty was most graphically discerned by Bauman (2000, pp. 135–6) who used the Germanic word, *Unsicherheit* as a way to express mounting levels of social anxiety and pessimism in a world imagined as drowning in liquid modernity:

> We live in a world of universal flexibility, under conditions of acute and prospectless *Unsicherheit*, penetrating all aspects of individual life … Safe ports for trust are few and far between, and most of the time trust floats unanchored vainly seeking storm-protected havens … our earnest efforts to 'put things in order' often result in more chaos, formlessness and confusion … our labour to eliminate contingency and accident is little more than a game of chance.

Bauman's description of vanishing trust propagating even more insecurity underlies the meaning of *Unsicherheit* as a prolonged condition of spiraling unknowns, jeopardizing all senses of stability and the will to believe in an ability to construct better futures. Even at the end of his prodigious writing career, he had to invent the

word *Retrotopia* (Bauman 2017) to address the desperation of populations subjectivized by the inertia of insecurity to seek some modicum of certainty in their reconstructions of the past. From postmodernity to liquid modernity and finally to retrotopia represents Bauman's attempt to portray the reverses of Enlightenment ideals by aggravated despair brought on in the wake of fallouts from the excesses of neoliberal capitalism. This despair marks the emergence of a new sense of turpitude in an era of high-tech innovations and digitized relationships that reinforces connectivity but at the same time produces more exploitability. It is a scenario of siege where populations become more huddled through their densely formed interconnections that are also 'in truth a far more pervasive dystopia of inequality, desperation, and hopelessness about the lack of alternatives caused by the capture of politics by economy' (Featherstone 2017, p. 55). Into this abyss, populations are driven to believe in the promises of technological innovations and upgrades but are also rendered subservient to the growing power of states and corporations. It is at this level of subservience cloaked by the mass distractions of digitized work and play (Scholz 2013) that sieges could be imperceptibly launched without any inkling of political confrontation. The siege mentality that now pervades the whole world through lockdowns, movement restrictions, and economic strangulation under pandemic conditions may be considered an extension of this scenario of desperation juxtaposed against a vision of technological progress.

Against this backdrop of continuous insecurity, the problem of contagion becomes even more acute because the sense of impending doom and disaster is always at hand to render populations intensely susceptible to the entrainment of thoughts and actions of others as if solutions they conjure up would automatically arrive. In other words, insecurity breeds increased suggestibility. Panic triggered by widespread suggestibility implies a form of machinic mass hysteria in which subjectivity dissolves into a miasmic flow of impersonal imitations, tumultuous emotions, and frantic behaviors almost in a systemic fashion as if the abnormality of extreme conduct has transformed into new norms of human relationships. In the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, Sampson and Parikka (2020) suggest that it exemplifies a replacement of the cognitive model of rational choice by one that emphasizes the force of irrational and uncontrollable contagions as witnessed in the 'panic buying of toilet roll and paracetemol … alongside the early scenes of isolated Italians, impulsively bursting into songs of solidarity and support from their balconies…' These actions are described as stemming from 'peculiar contagions because … they are interwoven with contagions of psychological fear, anxiety, conspiracy, and further financial turmoil; all triggered by the indeterminate spread of Covid-19.'

The emergence of COVID-19 as a worldwide disease outbreak may be considered unusual in the sense that it is unparalleled in its form as hysterical contagion. Firstly, it is global in scope exceeding the boundaries of its alleged origins in China to create new epicenters in Europe, United States, and parts of Asia. In previous cases of mass hysteria, outbreaks were not reported as spreading like wildfire across towns, regions, and countries since the number of victims was generally small and confined to specific localities. Typically, cases occurred in schools, factories, and small towns and villages (Schuler and Parenton 1943; Kerckhoff and Back 1968; Teoh and Yeoh 1973; Stahl and Lebedun 1974; Lee and Ackerman 1980; Nandi

et al. 1985). Affectivity involving the spread of hysterical symptoms, bizarre behaviors, and delusory reactions were often confined to small circles of subjects in frequent contact with one another. However, COVID-19 is a boundary breaker as it has breached the limits of hysterical contagion observed in localized environments, diffusing throughout the whole world as both a viral disease as well as a replication of affects in the modernized north and modernizing south. This global process of replicating affects would not simply be a matter of randomly repeated emotions and behaviors but would concern a form of organized contagion that shows 'how affect moves through … across various political contexts [and] … through processes of circulation, engagement, and assemblage' (Lara et al. 2017, p. 34). Like the organization of platform-media structures that transmutes affective life leading to 'precise rules of feeling' (Boccia Artieri et al. 2021, p. 226), these processes can also influence the ways in which hysterical symptoms and behaviors are globally and uniformly manifested as in the example of mask-wearing to be discussed shortly.

Secondly, these global processes capitalize on fear as the principal emotion in the affective spread of hysterical symptoms and behaviors. Fear in this case is not merely an emotional reaction to the threat posed by viral infection but more specifically an intensity of feelings generated through 'the myriad encounters taking place between individual bodies and other finite things' (Thrift 2004, p. 63). But in a global context permeated by *Unsicherheit*, fear becomes even more intense because it has now become more 'diffuse, scattered, unclear' to underscore the sense of uncertainty accompanying 'our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be *done*' (Bauman 2006, p. 2). The sudden emergence of a new coronavirus codenamed SARS-nCoV2, allegedly a zoonotic transmission from bats to humans, originating from the Chinese city of Wuhan has amplified the fear of unknowns in ways not experienced before. The implicit mysteries of its genesis, potency, mutations, and transmissibility have created aspects of fear that require new levels of urgency in containing a threat not similarly encountered in other viral epidemics. For the first time in the annals of public health, subjects around the world are strongly advised or even mandated to put on protective coverings—from face masks and face shields to gloves and hazmat suits—at almost all times not as a means of dissipating fear but as one that reflects 'the fear of being incapable of averting or escaping the condition of being afraid' (ibid, p. 94). Thus, being afraid may be construed as de facto legitimation of an affectivity centering on moods of uncertainty that can instrumentally bring about new rules of feelings, attitudes, and behavior. Globally, this instrumentality of fear instantly becomes a conduit for more assemblage forms of control wherein bearers of public health structures are authorized to conduct tests, announce and enforce health protocols, and carry out inoculation programs. In other words, being afraid of viral infection can ramify into other fears of authoritarian control.

Thirdly, the global fear of COVID-19, the disease that allegedly results from SARS-nCoV2 infection, has spawned automatic perceptions and treatments of mass hysteria not witnessed before in previous eras. If by automaticity is meant 'signs that a person could be directed by someone or some*thing* else' and therefore leading to 'specific thresholds of experience that are distributed across human and non-human actors [and to be] considered dynamic, indeterminate, fleeting and related to distributive forms of agency and capacity' (Blackman 2014, pp. 379, 371), then

COVID-19 presents a case of interactive entanglements between world populations, viruses, global assemblages of health management, and state political actors that render hysterical subjectivity an epiphenomenon of machinic power. Through this power, automaticity is set up as a driver of repeatable contagions wherein new fears, new norms, and new treatments become regularized patterns of subjectivity that 'operate below the threshold of conscious attention and awareness' (ibid, p. 366). As suggested by Sampson (2020b, p. 197), these repeatable contagions in 'our current global sleepwalk into the Covid-19 pandemic' actually highlights the automaticity of mass hysteria as 'the monadic flows of micro-imitations that are in excess of contaminated [contagious] individuals.' This would not be an automaticity that results in a bizarre situation but one that repositions subjectivity 'as part of an infinitesimal relation to the world, experienced through insensible, and indistinct thresholds between macro and micro' (p. 198). Sleepwalking into the pandemic would imply that subjects are not really fully conscious of their own hysterical behavior but only non-consciously mimicking others who have also become figures in the 'oppositional micro-flows of imitation' (p. 199). These micro-flows must be considered in terms of a larger prearrangement of interventions whereby certain behaviors are set in motion, adjusted and readjusted in line with certain assemblages of intention and action, and come to be seen as new norms that meet the public requirements for combatting the uncertainty posed by new threats. In other words, we sleepwalk as automatons of intended hysterical imitation. And in this imitation, a type of community may come into place as a bulwark against the new dangers when the gravest danger it faces is 'its own preventative withdrawal from danger' (Esposito 2008, p. 105). The global scenario of the masked millions illustrates this new form of sleepwalking hysteria.

A grand masquerade

One of the most enduring signs of the COVID-19 crisis is the ubiquitous facial mask, cloth or synthetic, worn day and night by millions throughout the whole world as an alleged defense against a micro-predator that is carried by the air and the infected. As if coming straight out of a sci-fi novel or movie, these masked millions seem to be the collective personae of a new subjectivity under siege from a widespread belief in the rapid transmissibility and lethality of invasive viruses that can set off new plagues to harm global populations, as depicted in films like *Contagion* and *Outbreak*. Viruses are neither dead nor alive, or something 'existing on the border between chemistry and life' (Villareal 2004, p. 101), yet they are ironically posed as pathogens that can wreak havoc on human health by causing colds and fevers as well as severe illnesses like polio and AIDS. This 'organic nano-machine' with self-replicating powers (Gray 2021, p. 93) composes a source of terror to produce automatically contagions of fear that can set off new needs of consumption and control. The directive to put on facial masks, very often mandated by state authorities for public safety, is suggestive of a new need for a primary defense against respiratory illness believed to be caused by the coronavirus. They are to be worn almost at all times and especially in public places where intermingling with other subjects

is thought to be the most risky occasion for the transmission of viruses. Subjects as potential carriers need to seal their facial orifices against infecting others just as they need to protect themselves against those who might infect them. Enforcement of this practice is also an enforcement of distrust that raises an affectivity of suspicion for casting doubt on the health condition of every person in public spaces already carpeted by the shadows of *Unsicherheit*. This pervasive distrust underlies an emerging subjectivity of masked hysteria where a rabid contagion of viral fears, amplified by the purported increased infectiousness of viral mutations as displayed in the Delta and Omicron variants, converges with rising geopolitical and economic tensions to produce a poignant sense of disgust, distaste, and discrimination. Unmasked subjects have come to be scorned as non-conforming marginals of a new subjectivity cultivated through a global masquerade, even as some populist leaders associated with the political right chose to go mask-less in a bid to deny the severity of COVID contagion.[4]

This new subjectivity is powered firstly by assemblages of control that employ the language of professional health management to create new conditions or new norms of public behavior where subjects become beholden to generalized accounts or even caricatures of techno-scientific knowledge and practices as part of the conforming process in an automating mass society. The language deployed in this situation is intended as a facilitator of mass conformity, seguing from new assemblages of virology and vaccination research, pharmaceutical enterprises, political expediency actions, and public health advocacies and mandates. Collectively, these assemblages affirm the viral threat and automate directives for new mindsets and behaviors in routines euphemistically referred to as 'the new normal' and 'standard operating procedures.' In these routines, subjects have few or no options in adhering to new rules of public behavior such as standing equidistantly in long queues or having their body temperature recorded and scanning a QR code with their mobile apps for contact-tracing purposes before entering any venue. The facial mask can be regarded as an automated behavioral instance of these routines because very few subjects leave home without it and public spaces are always densely filled by masked faces as well as used masks littering sidewalks, streets, and parks. It has become a primary affect signifier for 'longstanding debates surrounding power, agency, subjectivity and biopolitics' (Blackman 2014, p. 364). Within the ambit of mask-wearing, these debates have resulted in new levels of toxicity in social media related to issues of personal freedom, identity and group membership. In the US, Pascual-Ferrá et al. (2021) found that anti-maskers were significantly more likely to use toxic language in these debates on social media. The toxicity of this language, however, may

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[4] On some political aspects of the masking issue, see Sampson and Parrikka (2020). The complexities emerging from this issue tend to give an impression that anti-masking (and thereby anti-authoritarianism) is in some ways associated with the far right. This impression is at the same time contradicted by the observation that liberal governments can suddenly turn authoritarian under stress. These reversals may exemplify the 'indistinct thresholds between macro and micro' (Sampson 2020b, p. 198) whereby there is no absolute separation between voluntary and involuntary—and in the manner of the above case, no real distinction between liberalism and authoritarianism or between far-right immunopolitics and defense of individual liberties.

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not be considered distinct in itself because it is tied deeply to the language of fear imbued by the concepts and lexicons of virus research that emphasize 'processes wherein we are subjected to various forms of corporeal attack and attachment, cleavage, and replication' (Armitage 2021, p. 119). The fear that trails this language and related issues is exacerbated automatically by the very logic of the pandemic image executed through 'speculative diagrams of contagion loops' depicted as statistical curves and simulations (Sampson and Parikka 2021). Therefore, the facial mask is always a reminder of the fear contagion underlying these loops as they rise and fall in accordance with changing definitions of disease vectors.

Secondly, the new subjectivity is always an outcome of micro-imitations forged by the ingrained need to know and follow what others are doing especially in situations that are fogged by uncertainty, contradictions, and corrosive politics. But this is not simply imitation for the sake of imitation; rather it is contagious behavior that spreads from subject to subject to collapse into 'a social cosmos of imitative relationality' (Sampson 2017, p. 63) where network or system imperfections become self-propagating (Parikka and Sampson 2009, p. 15). The imperfections themselves are not only repeatable, paraded ad infinitum, but also automated by external authorities that treat 'the state of exception' in a pandemic as the perfect condition for increased surveillance and control (Agamben 2020). Thus, micro-imitations readily create and recreate the atmospherics that convey the sense of vulnerability to viral infection in conjunction with mask-wearing as the *de rigueur* practice of addressing bodily imperfections in a disease crisis. As implied by Walby (2021, p. 24), the social democratic approach to disease crisis wherein the assumption that 'if one is sick, we are all potentially sick' may indeed indicate the micro-imitative processes coupled to adoption of the sick role in many hysterical outbreaks.[5] As sickness surges, so does mask-wearing multiply in accordance with a subjectivity rendered susceptible to increased imitation also imagined to be a momentary sign of solidarity (Hancock and Garner 2021, p. 564) that unsuspectingly dovetails with the social democratic sharing of the sick role. But what is perceived as 'a signal of civic good will' in mask-wearing (ibid) could be reducible to a spiraling anxiety in disease control and management that triggers an expanding cosmos of imitative relationality further reinforced by mandated health protocols.

These protocols also provide a context for a commoditization of fear through the increased production of facial masks, including those with flamboyant designs for upmarket retail, as well as other types of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as disposable gloves, plastic facial shields, goggles, and hazmat suits. This

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[5] As reported by Kerckhoff and Back (1968) in their classic study of hysterical contagion, the sick role can take on increased significance in situations that may provide advantages to victims of illness contagion. Their data indicated that 'those with a high inclination to adopt the sick role fainted as frequently as the other affected women' (p.141), thus making it possible for them to use that role to escape work as well as the perceived threat. In the case of COVID-19, it would be near impossible to determine how many non-infected subjects around the world had been playing that role. But it could be speculated that an undetermined proportion of asymptomatic subjects might have imagined and acted out their sickness to complicate the perception of viral contagion. It would imply that micro-imitation itself is a contributing factor to the spread of fear and anxiety among the non-infected and infected.

bewildering array of synthetic second skins is purportedly the promoter of 'civic goodwill' by creating a chambering effect for personal interaction without direct exposure to unseen viruses while also creating new markets for prêt-à-porter paraphernalia that would likely become a new source of gargantuan plastic waste. Yet, resistance is not absent as goodwill in an atmosphere of urgent *Unsicherheit* quickly fragments into a will to survive and to assert one's individuality in the face of overwhelming odds against an invisible and absent enemy. Subjects are known to have refused wearing masks when making purchases in supermarkets just as some supermarket employees have opposed the installation of PPE (Armitage and Featherstone 2021, p. 6).[6] But anti-masking behavior itself can quickly become an imitative trend where to be seen unmasked may prompt others to drop their masks, dangle them from one ear, or lower them below the chin (lampooned as chin-masking). For subjects feeling the pangs of nicotine addiction or succumbing to the urges to eat and drink, imitating the unmasked would only juxtapose the satiation of these needs to the risk of exposure to viral invasion. Yet, anti-masking imitation demonstrates that the cosmos of imitative relationality is not homogeneously arranged but rather highly fractious in pitting one form of mimicry against another form. As mass hysteria spreads, so do these opposing forms of mimicry that may come to shore up the idea of the antisocial society (Sloterdijk 2010) where otherness becomes a basis of social revulsion.

Oceans of masked faces around the world attest to a new level of mandated mimicry where subjectivity becomes shackled to the reinvention of mass hysteria as an emerging form of mass politics. Once a practice confined mainly to specific regions of viral infection (e.g., Baehr 2008) or to certain professions like medicine and dentistry, masking is now wittingly a technology of the social derived from intersecting assemblages of medicine, public health, state authorities, and PPE producers. This is a technology that refuses alternatives because it is a form of power-knowledge focused on turning vast populations into behavioral displays of disease-bearing hysterics that are partly automated by programmed controls under the regimes of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). These are regimes that are now drawing on the capabilities of network connectivity as machinic power to instantiate herd-like panic-driven forms of contagion as the setting for the new politics of virality.

The new politics of virality

Subjects now live dangerously in a digital age of remote manipulation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 'predictable interventions in the political unconscious of the democratic political process' (Thrift 2010, p. 266). These interventions are

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[6] Altercations over the masking protocol could also reach a dangerous level as in the case of a deadly shooting in western Germany where the cashier at a petrol station was killed by an irate man who had objected to wearing a mask for purchasing some beer (AFP report, 'Cashier shot dead by man asked to wear mask,' in *theSun*, September 22, 2021). Such a case suggests that mandated mimicry may have unseen consequences that are also part of the cycle of fear and violence.

made in line with neurological research on emotional regions of the brain in order to influence voting behavior (Houghton 2009, p. 144). If emotions, feelings and affects can be shaped and reshaped for political ends by subtle neuro-scientific means, 'then we might be observing the twenty-first-century realization of the imitative ray' (Sampson 2012, p. 180), a concept first proposed by Tarde (2000, p. 50) for explaining the flow of contagions. There is nothing peculiar about this ray because it is just a metaphor for speaking about an aspect of the learning process; subjects learn by observing or hearing what others do and say. But what is of great significance in the present century about this process concerns the digitization of this method whereby influences can be conveyed vicariously or through remote means via radio-frequency signals to set in motion and to organize and reorganize mindsets and behaviors surreptitiously in order to achieve specific goals. In politics, Protevi (2009) focuses on the unseen modulation of subjectivity that bypasses the regular cognitive processes in order for affectivity rather than rationality to drive political action. This approach inserts politics into the 'trans-subjective ontology of subjectivity' (Blackman 2014, p. 380) where collective action is not based on set forms of organization but on 'contagious relationality' in which subjectivity in increasingly connected populations is transformed by suggestibility in 'affectively prime social atmospheres' (Sampson 2012, pp. 3, 5). In particular, Sampson (2016, p. 60) stresses 'the crowd's vulnerability to mass suggestion experienced through joyful encounters' could develop into mutually empowering encounters beyond the original one. But just as or even more effective is the instillation of fear in encounters that can forge contagious relationality through a mutual suspicion of invisible threats manifested via conditioned sickness and stringent securitization. Fear is the key in modulating a hysterical subjectivity that can be used for overstating the political need for securitization in atmospherics already congealed by growing insecurity.

COVID-19 exemplifies this new political culture of virality where fear is instrumental to creating greater dependency on state power or as Bagus et al. (2021, p. 9) put it, 'Fear gives power over the fearful.' Given that 'diseases are an ideal ground for mass hysteria to develop' (ibid, p. 3), COVID-19 provides a most convenient setting for exercising this power over a subjectivity already made vulnerable to fear issues generated by the anxiety of securitization. This is not simply a power to increase the sense of civic goodwill in times of ascending angst but one directed toward a state of parabellum since the promulgation of a war on terror at the turn of the new century (ibid, p. 9). The terror of the virus at this moment continues from the terror launched by and against dissidents of the south contesting hegemonic interests of the north (Stearns 2006; Skoll 2011). By capitalizing on the affectivity arising from the ambience of terror, assemblages of control can readily skew the body politic in a direction that makes it even more susceptible to new waves of contagious terror. Therefore, no hiatus exists between the phases in the war on terror because the fear emanating from it constitutes a perennial source of mass bewilderment, confusion, and an impulse to discipline.

This source, however, is not independent of the 'chaosmic spasm' underlying the affectivity inherent to 'the un-world where there is no safety, security, or sense of home in others or in the wider environment' (Featherstone 2016, p. 260). The war on terror itself is a touchstone of this spasm that is mangling the

present and producing only a 'ruined subjectivity that knows nothing but pain and suffering' (ibid, p. 258). And the fear that feeds on this spasm is always running ahead of any terroristic event, including plagues, to pave the way for more control over the body politic. Thus, the rollout of viral mutations in the COVID-19 outbreak from the Alpha to Omicron variants descries an indefinite scope of unending terror where subjectivity is chained to a future of viral automaticity, which allows no lull in the manipulation of collective fear. Yet, the observation of worldwide protests against lockdowns and other stringent controls (Carothers and Press 2020) suggests an opposing subjectivity against this future but can its momentum be maintained in the context of a spasm that is also fuelling a 'neuro-totalitarianism, where the embodied self is totally aligned with the global circuitry of semio-capitalism' (Featherstone 2016, p. 263)? This totalitarianism is not merely concerned with the capture of subjectivity through a universe of signs and symbols but also with its systemic capability that 'turns humans into zombies, staggering through their environment in a liminal state somewhere between life and death' (ibid, p. 252). Zombification would suggest that protesters might not be fully liberated from a 'theater of the absurd' where the automation of mass hysteria does not preclude forms of opposition. Even Carothers and Press (2020) recognized that the protests 'have thus far not significantly changed the policies and actions of governments' and that 'they nevertheless spell continuity more than change in that trend.' Their conclusions would imply that the spasmodic convulsion seizing the entire world at this moment is far stronger than the protesters can ever imagine because mass hysteria has now become a global tool of control automating contagions of fear, alarm, and panic in ways that have not been witnessed before, to produce a new trans-subjective ontology of fearful disposition and unnerving submission.

Governing the masses through this new trans-subjective ontology suggests a reworking of power relations that no longer requires a standard deployment of words and images to influence the outcome of any political encounter. Instead, it is through the refinement of contagious techniques that the masses can be made to experience the affective encounter spreading 'from person to person, entering into the skin and *hacking* into the evolutionary drives' (Sampson 2012, p. 142). By strategically planting fear into this encounter, the political can be directly blended with the ensuing convulsion to reduce the distinction between macro and micro and thereby dissimulate control as rescue in situations defined as desperate and life-threatening. In this digital era of mass governance, mass hysteria need no longer be identified principally as an episodic or a localized convulsion but a tumult of scale hinging on the chaosmic spasm ripping through the entire planet since the dawn of the new century. The hysterical subjectivity that is now emblematic of spasmodic existence can be redefined as an automated outcome of the continuing waves of contagious terror unleashed on an intricately connected world. COVID-19 is merely one of these waves and in this unfolding trans-subjective ontology of despair and disease, world mass hysteria would only be anticipated as a repeatable byproduct of the new politics of virality.

Conclusion

The sudden propelling of the world into a pandemic predicament can be seen as a critical litmus test for a new form of mass politics where subjectivity becomes convulsed and constrained not by ideological factors but by affective contagions coursing through the myriad networks already set up in a densely interconnected world. If in this world digitization is intended to create a better connected and informed subjectivity, then what is observed in the present pandemonium amounts to its reversal where interconnectivity becomes a means for cowing subjectivity through a tsunami of fear in a social context already suffused with growing risks and uncertainties. What is being witnessed today in this cauldron of collective consternation is not just a panicked overreaction to a virus in 'the age of madness' (Levy 2020) but a highly effective automation of mass hysteria in a spasmodic context trained on the war on terror. Terror itself has become the central affective force in the governing of the masses. But it is also paradoxical since its sudden unleashing is reversing the gains of neoliberal capitalism through economic setbacks caused by the lockdowns and mass immobilizations. This paradox is indicative of the limits to which the endless search for immunity must face as the irreducible nature of otherness. In light of this dilemma, an analysis of 'what subjectivity can be made to do' (Lara et al. 2017, p. 40) may therefore provide a critical view of the present crisis not just as an automation of affective contagions but also as foresight of a future world where hysterical subjectivity is produced in order for it to be governed. Mass hysteria would no longer be an anachronism of past eras or peculiarities of the modernizing south but a machinic condition of mass control by contagion.

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