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Technological Utopia, End Times and the SARS-CoV-2 Crisis: A Genealogy of Crisis Ideoscapes and Mediascapes

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Cover Page Footnote

With special thanks to my graduate students, whose discussions and innovative thinking helped me work through this crisis genealogy.

In March 2020, a great medical exception to political and religious liberties was invoked in a global “lockdown,” whereupon approximately 3 billion people were subject to COVID-19 restrictions, according to the World Economic Forum.¹ Life was dislocated by pandemic curtailments of taken-for-granted freedoms of circulation and congregation across the world, with unprecedented proportion, unknown effects, and an “unrelenting horizonlessness.”² Roland Gori contends that with the return of epidemics, a logic of population management is being elevated over social subjectivities as epidemiology is institutionalized as a key “new advisor of power.”³ Gori’s observation bears consideration as crises historically create opportunities for the consolidation of power as efforts to shore up precarious assemblages of matter and meaning include emergency declarations and statutes that suspend ordinary rights and guarantees, including those related to social mobility and personal expression. Jure Vujić concludes from this that a post-liberal biopolitical government is emerging around “the imperative of fighting the invisible enemy of the ‘virus’, and not on the ideas or democratic will.”⁴

In fueling cascading “exceptions” to ordinary routines, norms, and juridical proceedings, crises prompt social sense-making. During the spring 2020 lockdowns, the significant suspensions of civil liberties energized online discussion. In this fraught context, heterogeneous narrative accounts of SARS-CoV-2 origins and effects flourished online, each encoding distinct worldviews and approaches for managing the virus and its effects.⁵ Crisis authorities represent the proliferation of social-sensemaking as “misinformation” threatening “truth” and institutional pandemic controls. Yet, authorities’ efforts to present a coherent narrative foundered on expressed uncertainties and equivocations regarding critical issues, such as the utility of masks, risk of airborne transmission, efficacy of drugs such as Ivermectin and

¹ Linda Lacina, “Nearly 3 Billion People Around the Globe under COVID-19 Lockdowns,” *The World Economic Forum*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/todays-coronavirus-updates/>.

² Nick Couldry and Bruce Schneier, “The Unrelenting Horizonlessness of the Covid World,” *CNN*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/22/opinions/unrelenting-horizonlessness-of-covid-world-couldry-schneier/index.html>

³ Roland Gori, “Care and Democracy Put to the test by Health Totalitarianism,” *Cliniques Méditerranéennes* 103, no. 1 (2021): 23-39. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cm.103.0023>.

⁴ Jure Vujić, “The Bio-Politics of COVID-19 and the Question of Post-Totalitarianism,” in *Security Crises in the 21st Century and How to Manage Them: Vol. 1*, edited by Zoran Keković, Marija Đorić, and Jadranka Polović, (Libertas, Belgrade: Caruk, 2021), 212.

⁵ Majia Nadesan, “Crises Narratives Defining the COVID-19 Pandemic: Expert Uncertainties and Conspiratorial Sensemaking,” *American Behavioral Scientist* (forthcoming).

hydroxychloroquine, and the safety of vaccines, eroding trust in recommendations.⁶ Failed efforts at mass persuasion prompted algorithmic censorship.

Algorithms capable of censoring “conspiracy” talk about the pandemic were advertised by those seeking to police social media sense-making.⁷ Accordingly, Vujić decries “algototalitarianism,” described as “a simulation of imprisonment in various countries and beyond on a global scale, automating the repression of ‘rule violations’ and inciting self-censorship.”⁸ Algorithmic control over meaning-making presumes a uniform and invariant story of origins, effects and best practices of governance, and yet the shifting significance of particular SARS-CoV-2 narratives, such as the Wuhan Laboratory origins narrative, demonstrates how a once-censored account moved from social media margins to mainstream news headlines over time. Moreover, censorship of dissident expert views regarding pandemic policies and treatment protocols have further eroded public trust in institutional intentions, as observed by the nongovernmental organization, Human Rights Watch.⁹ Authoritarian policing of meaning breeds resistance even while relegating alternative knowledge and experiences to the margins where outlaw narratives exert a kind of liminal force in both containing and troubling a preferred version,¹⁰ what we might call “the one,” following Alain Badiou.¹¹ Although crisis communications best practices emphasize transparency and dialogue, in practice crisis communication too often simply aim to re-establish a disrupted institutional order.¹²

Crisis communications don’t simply aim to restore institutional order, but also operate epistemically as they provide a preferred narration of crisis timelines, characteristics, effects and governance. These narrations are inescapably political as they reflect the intentionalities of crisis authorities conditioned by cultural expectations, as well as exigent crisis contingencies. Drawing upon ongoing pandemic

⁶ Julian Barnes, Matthew Rosenberg, and Edward Wong, “As Virus Spreads, China and Russia See Openings for Disinformation,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/us/politics/china-russia-coronavirus-disinformation.html>.

⁷ Shadi Shahsavari, Pavan Holur, Tianyi Wang, Timothy Tangherlini, and Vwani Roychowdhury, “Conspiracy in the Time of Corona: Automatic Detection of Emerging COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in Social Media and the News,” *Journal of Computational Social Science* 3 (2020): 279–317.

⁸ Vujić, “The Bio-Politics of COVID-19 and the Question of Post-Totalitarianism,” 210.

⁹ “COVID-19 Triggers Wave of Free Speech Abuse,” Human Rights Watch, February 11, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/covid-19-triggers-wave-free-speech-abuse>.

¹⁰ Jack Bratich, “The People and the Public: Cyber-demagoguery and Populism” in *Mapping Populism*, edited by Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan (Milton Park: Routledge), 42–54.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 24.

¹² Magnus Fredriksson, “Crisis Communication as Institutional Maintenance,” *Public Relations Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (2014): 319–340.

scholarship on expert and counter-public narratives,¹³ this paper represents a genealogy elucidating the historical, cultural, and political horizons of intelligibility for symbolic constitutions of the pandemic. I deploy Arjun Appadurai's framework for exploring disjunctures in global cultural flows to describe historical western horizons of intelligibility for the present pandemic crisis and the symbolic orders crisis representations seek to restore and/or reform.¹⁴ Western crisis "ideoscapes," as defined by Appadurai as "concatenations of images," elicit particular representational frames which are articulated in contemporary "mediascapes," rendering the invisible viral matter of SARS-CoV-2 knowable and governable.¹⁵ Scholarship by such diverse thinkers as Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter,¹⁶ Michel Foucault,¹⁷ and Alain Badiou¹⁸ elucidates the characteristics and relationships of our taken-for-granted crisis ideoscapes, revealing utopian and eschatological presuppositions that deflect attention from the politics of institutional relationships and human communities. These crisis ideoscapes dominate contemporary mediascapes and in so doing act to polarize audiences around contested crisis narratives. To re-assert the political nature of crisis communications therefore requires confronting presuppositions by thematizing the political relations among people and the irreducibility of conflicted meanings over crisis conditions and governance.

Western Crisis Ideoscapes: Political Particularities and Dialectical Totalization

Koselleck and Richter¹⁹ provide a seminal history of the Western concept of crisis and in so doing excavate an ideoscape steeped paradoxically in the particularities of politics, religious eschatology, and the Enlightenment world view, all of which provide horizons of intelligibility for the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic origins, disease syndrome and social effects. These authors begin with an etymology of origins anchored in ancient Greek meanings, which were expressed in the spheres of law, medicine, and theology and were rooted in the verbs to separate, choose, judge, decide, quarrel or fight. These significations emphasized political conflict, the exigency of decision-

¹³ Nadesan, "Crisis Narratives."

¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (1990): 295-297.

¹⁵ Appadurai, "Disjunctures and Difference," 299.

¹⁶ Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter, "Crisis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 357-400.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon. (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007).

¹⁹ Koselleck and Richter, "Crisis," 358-359.

making, and the momentousness of decisions in shaping future conditions. Significations of judgment, trial, and legal decision prevailed also with the Romans, but crisis was additionally inflected to include a “point in time in which a decision is due but has not yet been rendered.”²⁰ The important take-aways from this early formulation are that political conflict is an inescapable dimension of crisis and that deliberative procedures are critical for achieving agreement on paths forward.

The early relationship between crisis and politics mutates as the ancient Greek and Roman meanings of crisis were extended to the sphere of medicine, as developed in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* and by the Roman scholar-doctor-philosopher Galen (129-99). The medical view of crisis designated observable conditions and stressed the expert’s judgment (*judicium*) regarding the patient’s survival and in doing so combined “objective” analysis of disease symptoms with the “subjective” authority of expertise.²¹ Medical judgment delineated between (1) perfect and imperfect crises in the medical sphere, with the latter designating potential relapse; and (2) between acute and chronic crises. European medical texts began referencing this medical sense of crisis in the 14th century, but the extrapolated idea of a medical crisis applied to the “body politic” did not occur until the early 1600s, as shall be discussed presently. What is key to this medicalized formulation of crisis, whether applied to the patient or the body politic, is that the early emphasis on politics is replaced by the authority of expert judgment.

Politics continues to recede in the Old and New Testament as God’s judgment of His people is emphasized. Judgment “contains a promise of salvation” and subsequently acquires eschatological significance with the belief that the end-time crisis will deliver the “Last Judgment (*xpigt/-krisis* = *judicium*), whose hour, time, and place remained unknown but whose inevitability is certain.”²² Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, crisis denotes judgment in a linear temporality that diverges significantly from the eternally recurring cycles of the Greek and Roman philosophies. Time in early Christianity flows from creation to a final and divine event, the “eschaton.”²³ Although some early believers feared apocalypse as “an imminent cataclysmic intervention by God in history,” others viewed the end of time as a promise of radical change and revelation with the possibility of deliverance in the form of heaven on Earth.²⁴ Hence, end times imaginaries can be distinguished based

²⁰ Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 361.

²¹ Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 359.

²² Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 359.

²³ Delf Rothe, “Governing the End Times? Planet Politics and the Secular Eschatology of the Anthropocene,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2020): 157.

²⁴ Rothe, “Governing End Times?” 157-158.

on whether they promote messianism or katechontism, where the former emphasizes human agency in accelerating delivery of the utopian promise of salvation, while the latter seeks to postpone the end time through directed human agency.²⁵ Across Christian end time imaginaries, Koselleck and Richter describe a tension between the Apocalypse anticipated by faith and experienced as “already present” and the irreducible openness of the end “as a cosmic event” even while taking place within one’s own consciousness.²⁶ The articulated relationships across crisis, spiritual awakenings and last days become firmly entrenched in the Western religious and cultural imaginaries, as shall be discussed at greater length presently.

However, what Koselleck and Richter emphasize is the linear view of temporality that emerges in the early modern period and the grand narrative of a common history that get articulated around this linear temporality. In the author’s preface to *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Koselleck observed that the collective concept of “history” was coined in the eighteenth century and henceforth organizes “specific dispositions and ways of assimilating experience” that reflect “Enlightenment reflection on the growing complexity of ‘history in general,’ in which the determinations of experience are increasingly removed from experience itself.”²⁷ In *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Koselleck argues for a link between the “origins of the modern philosophy of history and the start of the crisis which, initially in Europe, has been determining political events even since 1789.”²⁸ Koselleck sees the generalized concept of history as universalizing and naturalizing European bourgeoisie values, especially Utopianism.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, history gets transformed into a “sort of legal process” whereby the “tribunal of reason” subsumes by critique “all regions touched by criticism.”²⁹ Eschatology “recoils into Utopianism” as the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* sheds religious encumbrances.³⁰ Yet, Koselleck argues that this idea that “history is open to planning” is a misconception because the construct of history itself is detached from the historical particularities of politics, bound as it is to “Utopianism” and the “Absolutist State.”³¹ In sum, Koselleck sees a singular view of

²⁵ Dillon, Michael. “Specters of Biopolitics: Finitude, Eschaton, and Katechon.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 3 (2011): 780–92.

²⁶ Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 360.

²⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia, 2004), 4.

²⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford: Basic Books, 1988), 6.

²⁹ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 9–10.

³⁰ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 11.

³¹ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 11–12.

history emerging around 1789 that is indebted to older juridical and medical views of crisis, but extrapolated to the social body. The social body is given a semblance of unity through articulation of a common history, thought spiritually or in relation to bourgeoisie values, such as Utopianism, but the impossibility of symbolic closure delivers inescapable crisis. Crisis is inevitable because of a systematically distorted representational system disconnected by abstraction from political particularities. Abstracted and curated crisis ideoscapes are particularly amenable to the political machinations of those who can control them.

Koselleck's concerns about the emergence of a singular modern history is generally consistent with Michel Foucault's critique of the "Age of History," argues Elías Palti in an interesting comparison of thinkers.³² However, Palti contends that Koselleck overly abstracts and simplifies crisis typologies by eliding counter-historical temporalities and the complex circulations of politics across *medical* formulations of crisis. Koselleck's formulation especially depoliticizes medical crisis with an objectivist interpretation that erases politics in producing medical meaning and naively assumes a sort of detached objectivity among experts. Sergei Prozorov agrees with Palti's critique, arguing for the superiority of Foucault's governmental approach to crisis, describing it as better adapted to unravelling the power relations implicit in crisis identification and expert governance:

Foucault chooses to approach crisis as a 'juridico-political' matrix of decisive judgement which could be applied in much the same way in medicine and law. . . after all, it is the authority of the doctor that permits the identification of a crisis and the possibility of incorrect identification places this authority in question, paving the way for its contestation.³³

Prozorov hones in on the role of institutional authority in constructing crisis, illustrating this point by describing in Foucauldian terms how the psychiatric hospital opened a space for madness, which was rendered in and out of being by medical expertise.³⁴ As Foucault explained in *The Birth of the Clinic*, "Before it is removed from the density of the body, disease is given an organization, hierarchized into families, genera, and species" and this "classificatory medicine" presupposes a certain 'configuration' of disease" and produces "tertiary spatialization," defined as the

³² Elías Palti, "The Birth and Death of Philosophy of History," in *Philosophy of Globalization*, edited by Concha Roldán, Daniel Brauer and Johannes Rohbeck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 410.

³³ Sergei Prozorov, "Foucault and the Birth of Psychopolitics: Towards a Genealogy of Crisis Governance," *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 1 (2020): 5.

³⁴ Prozorov, "Foucault and the Birth," 2.

techniques of medical investment and control.³⁵ The lessons learned from these critiques is the inescapability of politics in *all* crisis formulations, especially when extrapolated to the social body and the historical trend toward extrapolating crisis to a homogenized social body while elevating expert judgement in its determination.

Notwithstanding nuanced differences in their political interpretations and extensions of medical crisis, Koselleck and Foucault share the view that totalizing views of history that articulate crisis in terms of utopian unfoldings elide historical complexities and turbulence, that is, the material politics of the early modern period. In *Critique and Crisis*, Koselleck points to Thomas Paine's (1736-1809) writings as exemplifying this shift in temporal paradigm toward a uniform and teleological view of history.³⁶ Paine's "The Crisis" was printed as a series of pamphlets, the first published in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on December 19, 1776, as George Washington retreated from British forces across the Delaware River. At the war's close, in 1783, Paine penned *The Crisis* 13, wherein he emphasized America's revealed moral superiority and in so doing articulated the conflict between the colonists and British troops as having derived from a "moral crisis."³⁷ Accordingly, Koselleck represents Paine as exalting America's revolutionary pedagogy in a universalizing history of moral development, an interpretation grounded in the following passage from Paine:

THE times that tried men's souls,"* are over—and the greatest and completest revolution the world ever knew, gloriously and happily accomplished. . . . To see it in our power to make a world happy—to teach mankind the art of being so—to exhibit, on the theatre of the universe a character hitherto unknown—and to have, as it were, a new creation intrusted to our hands, are honors that command reflection, and can neither be too highly estimated, nor too gratefully received.³⁸

For Koselleck and Foucault, a totalizing era of common history had begun.

Accordingly, Koselleck and Richter observe that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the medical concept of crisis was "applied to the 'body politics' or to its constituent parts," engendering significations including a nation's constitutional survival, heightened tensions within and among nations, and military

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1994), 4, 16.

³⁶ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 374-375.

³⁷ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 181.

³⁸ Thomas Paine "The American Crisis," in *The Federalist Papers Project*, edited by Steve Straub, 136. <https://thefederalistpapers.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/The-American-Crisis-by-Thomas-Paine-.pdf>

conflict and war.³⁹ Crisis derives from the political unrest of the nascent body politic, but is subsumed within a grand view of history whose “events” disclose historical processes and mark assertion of liberal rights of personhood, and whose “trajectory” is synthesized in a kind of spiritual Manifest Destiny.

The early 1800s were especially fraught with crisis as this language was widely deployed to describe complex juridical, economic, political and spiritual issues and challenges of the times. There were recurrent silver, commercial, agricultural and labor crises. Yet, despite the particularities of politics, the political crisis of the rights of man was made eschatological and evangelical in anti-slavery texts of the Second Great Awakening. For example, Julia Ward Howe’s (1861) “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” commences with the end time event – “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” – and emphasizes judgment: “He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat.”⁴⁰ Likewise, Eugen Weber (1999) observes in *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs Throughout the Ages* that Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) believed in the Second Coming, considering its imminence a distinct possibility, and felt with others of her time that only through abolishing slavery could the U.S. achieve its millennial calling.⁴¹

The eschatological and totalizing horizon of intelligibility for crisis informed nineteenth-century social theory as well, overcoding the particularities of politics. For example, Karl Marx’s 1887 *critique of political* grappled with material politics, such as the economic crises of 1825 and 1830,⁴² and monetary crises, which derive from the crises of the commodity form.⁴³ However, Marx ultimately subsumed crisis particularities in the dialectical synthesis. In footnote 50, Marx distinguished the formal monetary crisis that is a “phase of every [capitalist] crisis” from the historically specific “particular form of crisis,” limited to industry and commerce and pivoting on moneyed capital, banking, the stock exchange, and finance.⁴⁴ Marx prioritized the importance of the “generalized monetary crisis” because he saw it as deriving from formal contradictions in the capitalist value system: “In a crisis, the antithesis between commodities and their value-form, money, becomes heightened into an absolute

³⁹ Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 362.

⁴⁰ Cited in Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (London: Hutchinson, 1999), 178.

⁴¹ Weber, *Apocalypses*, 179.

⁴² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1. (New York: Penguin, 1992), 97, 583.

⁴³ Marx, *Capital*, 236.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 236.

contradiction.”⁴⁵ The absolute contradiction is akin to the medicalized crisis of the body politic, resolved through the dialectical resolution of formerly incompatible political particularities in a totalizing synthesis, a transcendent new form of social organization.

Agency also is subsumed by the imperatives of the dialectical synthesis. Yet, a radical disjuncture emerges between crisis and awareness that stalls the inevitable and Hegelian progress of history. A collective consciousness of capitalism’s structural contradictions is a prerequisite for revolution, and hence crisis plays an indispensable role in sundering the veil of ideology, positioning the newly conscious as agents of history. This imaginary invokes eschatological themes, which are repeatedly rejected by Marxist scholarship, yet refuse to be put to rest entirely, as described by Roland Boer, who explored the persistent idea of Marxism as a form of secularized messianism. Boer explains: “Jewish and Christian thought has influenced the Marxist narrative of history, which is but a pale copy of its original: the evils of the present age with its alienation and exploitation (sin) will be overcome by the proletariat (collective redeemer), who will usher in a glorious new age when sin is overcome, the unjust are punished, and the righteous inherit the earth.”⁴⁶ Boer rejects such a simplistic formulation but observes that early French socialist thought may have influenced both Marx’s and Engels’s utopian thoughts about communism.

In the twentieth century, conservative social theorist Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* argues, as its title suggests, that history has achieved closure in the form of a (near) universal and homogeneous state founded in the doublet of the free market and liberal democracy.⁴⁷ The historical trajectory of crisis has ended, the argument goes, because capitalism has overcome its dialectical other and promises to achieve near-universal recognition for each particular in their individuality. Although Fukuyama recognizes the imperfection of modern liberal democratic states, he argues that they constitute the ideal social form for satisfying the universal desire named *thymos*, a soulful drive for individual recognition.⁴⁸ Fukuyama’s “end of history” is indebted to Kojève’s interpretation of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770–1831) philosophy of history, which posited a master-slave dialectic as motivating historical developments toward an idealized state in which universal recognition would be achieved for all in their individuality (signifying the

⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 236.

⁴⁶ Roland Boer, “Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered,” *Mediations* 25, no. 1 (2010): 39.

⁴⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 181–191.

dialectical reconciliation of universality and particularity).⁴⁹ While that state looked for Hegel much like the German one, Kojève felt that twentieth century capitalism marked the ultimate synthesis, the end of dialectical struggle, and the death of “man,” if s/he is defined in relation to change-oriented actions.⁵⁰ For Kojève, the end of history is not necessarily a utopian moment, as illustrated by his deeply ambivalent assessment of the dangers of bureaucratic and technocratic forms of life on human consciousness. However, in contrast to Kojève’s pessimism, Fukuyama in 1992 affirmed what he saw as the end of history in the hegemony of the Western, modern liberal capitalist democracy, described as lacking “externality,” or fundamental limits to its sovereignty.⁵¹

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida writes vehemently against the totalizing idea of the end of history:

For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity . . . no degree of progress allows us to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth.⁵²

Arguing against totalization, Derrida draws on Hamlet to invoke the sense that time is “*disarticulated*, dislocated, time is run down, on the run and run down”; it is “*deranged*, both out of order and mad.”⁵³ The time is out of joint.⁵⁴ Shorn of a philosophy of history, crisis loses teleology and transcendent significance. Each crisis is therefore rendered discrete and particular and polysemous in its politics, challenging social efforts to draw generalized meanings from, and control over, the deranged happenstances of reverberating events. What is required is an alternative formulation or imaginary freed of a teleological logic fueled by crisis. Yet, the positivist responses to the problems of the philosophy of history present other limitations in conceptualizing crisis.

⁴⁹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980): 159.

⁵⁰ Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

⁵¹ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 337.

⁵² Jacque Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by P. Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85.

⁵³ Derrida, *Specters*, 18.

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Specters*, 19.

20th-Century Crisis: Event-Process and the Problem of the One

Anglo-American twentieth-century historians rejected the continent's philosophy of history in favor of a positivist reading of events defined methodologically by empiricism and focused on such questions as the appropriateness of covering laws and the relationship between historical knowledge and evidence, with little to no interest in such matters as the meaning and recurring structural forms of history.⁵⁵ A good example is provided in Robert Kutak's "Sociology of Crisis: The Louisville Flood of 1937" which articulates universal crisis "elements" and the necessities of functional organizational responses to them.⁵⁶ Crisis was domesticated in the depths of the Great Depression by identifying generalizable elements, precursors and stages and developing planned responses for modeled risks, rendering crisis malleable to human engineering. This same formula of responding, anticipating and pre-empting crises of the body politic, or nation-state, informed Progressive institutions and post-WWII Keynesian economics.

Positivism's domination of the post-WWII U.S. academy encouraged encyclopedia-style crisis typifications and taxonomies and promoted cybernetic "learning logics" for reigning in the catastrophic military-industrial forces unleashed by modernity. Distanced in time from the experienced and mediated horrors of WWII, late-twentieth-century scientific institutions sanitized crisis from eschatological ideoscapes using precise crisis taxonomies and covering laws. Christophe Roux-Dufort offers a concise synopsis of two commonly invoked contemporary crisis typifications: event and process views of crisis.⁵⁷ The event approach emphasizes harmful or hazardous incidents or accidents, defined in relation to impacts and damages and triggered by events whose properties (e.g., event phases) and probabilities are intensely dissected. In contrast to the narrowed temporality of the event approach, process approaches are temporally protracted, seeing crisis as tending to emerge in distinct phases, such as warning signals, triggering events, acute phases, amplifications, and resolutions. The observer's task is to capture the unfolding complexities of crisis preconditions and consequences across time, often by discerning latent patterns, whose identification can enable cybernetic control over conditions by applying lessons learned from previous crises of the same type.

⁵⁵ Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/history/>.

⁵⁶ Robert Kutak, "The Sociology of Crises: The Louisville Flood of 1937," *Social Forces* 17, no 1 (1938): 66.

⁵⁷ Christophe Roux-Dufort, "Delving into the Roots of Crises: The Genealogy of Surprise," in *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research*, ed. by Andreas Schwarz, Matthew Seeger and Claudia Auer (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2016), 24-33.

Epistemological problems trouble both formulations, which together presuppose the event, the crisis, within naively objectivist terms. Roux-Dufort navigates this tension as he transforms the event approach to crisis using the language of weak signals. Weak signals are believed to hold “fragments of the future that, properly decoded, enable one to grasp the essence of forthcoming changes”⁵⁸ Roux-Dufort acknowledges that this formulation presumes a given future event and then attributes precursor signs to it, which seems to reintroduce a teleological imperative, but nonetheless insists on the disclosive power of weak signals in developing his idea of crisis as both accidental and revelatory:

For the idea that signs could herald the turning point prompts us to make a connection between the accidental nature and the revelatory character of a crisis, that is, between an event-based perspective that views the triggering event as a starting point, and a perspective that considers the event as the end point of a previously unknown destabilizing dynamic (Sagan, 1997). A crisis is clearly unpredictable, unusual, and extraordinary, and is by nature accidental. After the crisis, nothing can be the same. It marks a turning point and, to a certain extent, a suspension of time. In this sense, it is both unique and decisive. Above all, it acts as a rift between past and future. It transcends the present and reconfigures the field of future possibilities.⁵⁹

Crisis suspends time between past and future, allowing analysis of turning points thought as “meeting” points between “the before, when one is often unaware of what might be in the offing, and the after, when one is often convulsed by discovering it.”⁶⁰ Although “inassimilable” in their entirety, weak signals help read crises and in so doing transform meanings and hold the potential for transforming crisis event trajectories.

Roux-Dufort’s eloquent existential phenomenology is a welcome escape from positivism as it attempts to reconcile subjective and objective components of crisis, centering human agency in interpreting and transforming crisis conditions. The dynamics of his process resonate intuitively with personal experience, but the collective sense-making by institutions centered in his weak signals approach risks producing homogenized and totalizing crisis articulations that can reproduce power/knowledge hierarchies. Alain Badiou challenges us to interrogate that process of producing a unified meaning by deconstructing the very idea of “the one.” Badiou

⁵⁸ Roux-Dufort, “Delving into the Roots of Crises,” 31.

⁵⁹ Roux-Dufort, “Delving into the Roots of Crises,” 32.

⁶⁰ Roux-Dufort, “Delving into the Roots of Crises,” 32.

argues in *Being and Event* that “What has to be declared is that the one, which is not, solely exists as *operation*. In other words: there is no one, only the count-as-one.”⁶¹ Badiou’s complex philosophy escapes a simple synopsis but the point made here is well taken: The constitution of the event in the singular is an operation, it is literally created by collapsing multiplicity. A “situation” is “any presented multiplicity” and its order is the one, which is an inescapable social fabrication.

20th Century Crisis Mediascapes and the Problem of the One

The Western crisis ideoscape, constituted by an assemblage of conflicting ideas and images, was incorporated and curated in twentieth-century media imaginaries, what Appadurai refers to as *mediascapes*, which narrated the particularities of “news” events, but also re-asserted through distinct codings eschatological representations of crisis.⁶² In particular, a homogeneous and totalizing ideoscape of Anglo-American Western history was narrated in significant part by the news media, public relations, and advertising industries, beginning in earnest after World War I, when radio and print circulated widely in domestic spaces and early film had captured public imaginations. In opening *Public Opinion* (1922), Walter Lippmann observes, in “The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads,” that “Looking back we can see how indirectly we know the environment in which nevertheless we live. We can see that the news of it comes to us now fast, now slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself.”⁶³ For Edward Bernays, the capacity for mediated information to create social reality represented great political and economic opportunities. Bernays’ *Propaganda*, first published in 1928, offered practitioners in industry and government a practical guide to deploying propaganda. His promotional practices inspired social engineering campaigns designed to bring about change in consumer habits, worldviews, beliefs, and attitudes by appealing to unconscious desires and anxieties.⁶⁴ Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) *Manufacturing Consent* provided the late-twentieth-century critics’ update on the eschatological ideoscape of U.S. manifest destiny.⁶⁵ These disparate thinkers explored the possibilities for common history to be engineered for the purpose of social control using mass media technologies.

⁶¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 24.

⁶² Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference,” 296.

⁶³ Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (Project Gutenberg, 1922). <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/6456>.

⁶⁴ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928/1930).

⁶⁵ Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Dissent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002).

Mass-mediated representations of history are often calculated representations designed to produce preferred audiences. Crisis emerged as a tool in the arsenal of twentieth-century opinion makers, as so brilliantly described in Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, which explores the engineering of consent around crisis interpretations and policies.⁶⁶ Klein is particularly focused on human-engineered institutional crises deriving from a kind of economic and social sabotage, as illustrated by systematic underfunding of public health in the U.S., which results in organizational failures whose ruptures are exploited and managed by the new opinion leaders.

Managing crisis meanings assumed even more significance in the hyper-connectivity and productivity of the Internet era. Despite fostering the proliferation of meanings, the Internet offered unprecedented opportunities for surveillance and micro-targeting, as illustrated compellingly by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which claimed the capacity to make ads more persuasive by tailoring them to individuals' personality characteristics using data on demographics, purchases, voting behavior, etc., including data harvested from 87 million Facebook users.⁶⁷ Social media seduce by promising to salve that burning need for recognition that Fukuyama called *thymos*. Yet, human agency online is circumscribed by platform protocols, algorithms and trained human judges who emerge as key arbitrators of online truths, ordering and reigning in multiplicity, often using crude logical codes, such as true/false and trustworthy/not-trustworthy, that require elaborate simplifications.

Abstracted and mediated, contemporary crises and their histories are hyperrealities in the Baudrillardian sense. Although the semiotics of meaning production have always been deluded by the assumption of a primary reflection (the "mirror" view of meaning), contemporary mediated semiosis is hyperreal in the sense that the requirements of reference to the *real* have been substituted by a self-referential hypertextuality: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory. . . ."⁶⁸ The Internet facilitates social sense-making, and narratives circulate there unhinged from the demands of empiricism. Some narratives were created by individuals—prophets, whistleblowers, and shills—while others

⁶⁶ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

⁶⁷ Sam Schechner, Jenny Gross, and Rebecca Ballhaus, "Firms' Profiling of Voters Didn't Work, Clients Say," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2018, p. A9.

⁶⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), 1.

reflect the stories of speech communities of believers. Still other narratives were planted by institutional agents with calculated efforts toward propagandization. These disinformation narratives often yield to classical and realist tests of knowledge, but deflect such inquiry by their affective hooks designed to produce emotional identification, rather than intellectual engagement.

SARS-CoV-2 Crisis and the Failures of the One

Efforts to police truth in this prolific Internet context operate in binary fashion, coding selected data as information (truth) or disinformation. Badiou's engagement with set theory illuminates the problem of efforts to bracket a singular truth: the constitution of the event, as such, entails a logic of unification, resulting in inescapable typification. Within the hegemonic SARS-CoV-2 crisis narrative, the ordering principle was expressed in the overarching imperative for the articulation of a universal account of zoonotic, or animal-derived origins, and expert, Zero-COVID containment. Yet, the very act of defining a viral outbreak was a technocratic operation occurring through an uneasy assemblage of government and private institutions. Early articulations of a novel coronavirus *created symbolic sequencing unity out of viral multiplicities* derived from clinical sampling and did so by assigning the multiplicity to a pre-existing coronavirus set and excluding inconvenient genetic sequencing in order to assert a singular story of certitude regarding origins.

On February 3, 2020, the scientific journal *Nature* published two of the first genetic studies on what was then described as the "novel coronavirus." The first study was led by Fan Wu and was titled, "A New Coronavirus Associated with Human Respiratory Disease in China."⁶⁹ The second study was led by Peng Zhou and was titled, "A Pneumonia Outbreak Associated with a New Coronavirus of Probable Bat Origin."⁷⁰ Each study separately offered ontological certitude with the genetic sequence of the newly discovered coronavirus. However, careful reconstruction of the history of the Wu publication reveals political particularities. In early January 2020 before the *Nature* publications, the genetic sequence was pre-published on preprint server bioRxiv and GenBank, an open-access data repository, by Wu and researchers from the Shanghai Public Health Clinical Centre, with Zhang Yongzhen listed as first

⁶⁹ Fan Wu et al., "A New Coronavirus Associated with Human Respiratory Disease in China," *Nature* 579, no. 7798 (2020): 265-269. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2008-3>

⁷⁰ Zhou, Peng, et al., "A Pneumonia Outbreak Associated with A New Coronavirus Of Probable Bat Origin," *Nature* 579, no. 7798 (2020): 270-273. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2012-7>.

author.⁷¹ The Zhang–Wu team had reported sequencing results to China’s National Health Commission, but subsequently posted them online after the commission’s failure to act on their recommendations for control. In seeming retaliation, Zhang’s Shanghai centre was promptly ordered to close for “rectification” by the Shanghai Health Commission.⁷² Despite this rectification, the team’s genetic sequence was updated twice, with the second version posted January 14, 2020, and a third version updated January 18.⁷³ Authorship of the final and peer-reviewed version published in *Nature* on February 3 included two new authors (Ming-Li Yuan and Edward Holmes).⁷⁴ On pages 270–273 of the same *Nature* issue, the second publication of SARS-CoV-2 genetic sequencing appears, led by Peng Zhou and including Zheng Li Shi, both of the CAS Key Laboratory of Special Pathogens, Wuhan Institute of Virology. Although alleging zoonotic origins, Peng Zhou and Zheng Li Shi subsequently figured prominently in online conspiratorial sense-making regarding SARS-CoV-2’s alleged provenance as a genetically-engineered virus escaped from the Wuhan lab.⁷⁵

The successively published sequences detailed above stoked international controversy over early viral characteristics and origins that could not be resolved because China had ordered all viral samples to be destroyed in late December 2019, leaving no material traces for subsequent verification.⁷⁶ Furthermore, genetic sequence data that had been archived in the preprint server bioRxiv by the Zhang–Wu team was discovered to have been removed in June 2020 per the researchers’ request.⁷⁷ Although the erasure of data heightened criticism of China’s role in the

⁷¹ Yongzhen Zhang et al., “A Novel Coronavirus Associated with a Respiratory Disease in Wuhan of Hubei Province, China,” GenBank MN908947.1. (2020, January 12): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nuccore/MN908947.1>.

⁷² Zhuang Pinghui, “Chinese Laboratory that First Shared Coronavirus Genome with World Ordered to Close for ‘Rectification’, Hindering its COVID-19 Research,” *South China Morning Post*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3052966/chinese-laboratory-first-shared-coronavirus-genome-world-ordered>.

⁷³ Yongzhen Zhang et al., “A Novel Coronavirus Associated with a Respiratory Disease in Wuhan of Hubei Province, China,” updated January 14, 2020 at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nuccore/MN908947.2>. Third version adopted January 18, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nuccore/MN908947.3>.

⁷⁴ Fan Wu, et al., “A New Coronavirus Associated with Human Respiratory Disease in China,” 265–269.

⁷⁵ Nadesan, “Crisis Narratives.”

⁷⁶ J. Chin, “China Told Labs to Destroy Coronavirus Samples to Reduce Biosafety Risks,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-told-labs-to-destroy-coronavirus-samples-to-reduce-biosafety-risks-11589684291>.

⁷⁷ Simone McCarthy, “Chinese COVID-19 Genetic Data in U.S. Archive Was Removed in June 2020, Virologist Finds,” *South China Morning Post*, June 24, 2021,

pandemic, documents from the National Institutes of Health obtained by The Intercept through a FOIA request in 2021 pointed to U.S. funding of gain-of-function research at the Wuhan lab.⁷⁸ The idea of a primordial genetic sequence of the pandemic virus, now designated as SARS-CoV-2, is revealed as an inescapably political operation, in the sense described by Badiou,⁷⁹ by these revelations. Symbolic excesses have precluded closure and control from the very first efforts to code the viral genome, revealing behind-the-scenes agendas and the global operations of institutional power.

Foucault and Koselleck share the view that the political particularities of crisis meanings are selectively ignored and/or assimilated teleologically in relation to a totalizing narrative, a grand, singular truth-telling. For Koselleck, this master narrative delivers inescapable crisis because it has become detached from the particularities of politics. For example, a technological-utopic narrative of zoonotic disease transfer, identification, and containment was implicitly promised through the masterful achievements of viral surveillance and sequencing heralded by these *Nature* publications. However, this institutional narrative of control was beset by crisis as it failed to resonate with ongoing appearances, including the series of successive publications, unexplained lab rectification, missing data, and hint of international intrigue. Although the very definition of the crisis as “pandemic” invokes established expertise and strategies of governance, the failure of “the one”—the approved set—points to the inescapable role of politics power/knowledge assemblages.

The pandemic mediascape is a heterogeneous “concatenation of images” and memes whose messy representations are *ordered* by crisis logics of techno-epidemiological control, even while unravelling in semiotic and viral excesses. Medical authorities and institutions stand in judgment (judicium), combining their “objective” analysis of the COVID-19 disease syndrome, origins, and trajectories with their “subjective” authority, seeking to articulate a unified meta-narrative of the virus, its biological effects and governance. Yet, expert certitude has been undermined by re-statements and surprises, as illustrated in a comment made by Dr. Gregory Poland, President of the U.S. Armed Forces Epidemiological Board and Professor of Medicine at Mayo Clinic Rochester: “This virus has very peculiar immunological secrets

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3138649/chinese-covid-19-genetic-data-us-archive-was-removed-june-2020>

⁷⁸ Sharon Lerner, Mara Hvistendahl, Maia Hibbett, “NIH Documents Provide New Evidence U.S. Funded Gain-of-Function Research in Wuhan,” *The Intercept*, September 9, 2021, https://theintercept.com/2021/09/09/covid-origins-gain-of-function-research/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=The%20Intercept%20Newsletter.

⁷⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 24.

wrapped up inside it.”⁸⁰ Therefore, there exists an unresolved tension between the sheer proliferation of viral meanings and the modernist requirement that crisis be subsumed teleologically to expert human control.

It is important to acknowledge that the ordering imperative is not merely propagandistic, as it is deeply rooted in cultural imaginaries, what Appadurai defines as historicized ideoscapes, which play critical roles in the identification, classification, interpretation and response to crisis.⁸¹ Delf Rothe demonstrates this point in his explication of the “Anthropocene,” a posited human-engineered extinction event, represented with respect to a “linear temporality and a common orientation towards the threat of the end of time.”⁸² Rothe delineates three distinct discourses of the Anthropocene: *ecocatastrophism*, the most ubiquitous of the discourses, illustrated in work by Thomas Malthus⁸³ and Paul R. Ehrlich⁸⁴ and characterized by a narrative “of planetary emergency management through new forms of ‘Earth system stewardship’”;⁸⁵ *eco-modernism*, a cybernetic learning discourse, articulating human responsibility and technological capacities in evading end times through the heroic planetary engineer whose local sustainability projects and planetary terraforming forestalls apocalypse; and *planetary realism*, distinguished by pessimism regarding planetary governance, but invoking resilience for managing complexity and uncertainty. Planetary realism’s nod to indigenous knowledge as illustrating perfected, albeit historicized, adaptations to local conditions too often represents a cynical appropriation where indigenous forms of knowledge are valued only to the extent they can be appropriated by white people to “guarantee their own survival.”⁸⁶ Eschatology resonates across these and other discourses of the Anthropocene, as Scott Hamilton points out, suggesting that this re-inscription essentially shuts down the indefinite time of an open future and in doing so “re-governmentalises the cosmos, by fusing sovereignty and history back on to a singular pathway leading to the world’s end in planetary catastrophe. This ‘end of our

⁸⁰ Quentin Fottrell, “Asymptomatic Transmission of Coronavirus Appears to be Worse than SARS or Influenza,” Market Watch, June 12, 2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/asymptomatic-transmission-of-coronavirus-may-be-worse-than-sars-or-influenza-2020-06-12?siteid=yhoof2andyptr=yahoo>.

⁸¹ Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference,” 296.

⁸² Delf Rothe, “Governing the End Times? Planet Politics and the Secular Eschatology of the Anthropocene,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2020): 143. DOI: 10.1177/0305829819889138

⁸³ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Edinburg/London: Ballantyne and Company, 1872).

⁸⁴ Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb: Population Control or Race to Oblivion?* (York: Sierra Club-Ballantine, 1968)

⁸⁵ Rothe, “Governing the End Times?,” 151.

⁸⁶ Rothe, “Governing the End Times?,” 155-156.

world' encloses time back into a definite linear historicity – a looming end that *all* must share – which implies the end of modern indefinite governmentality, the state, and even history itself.”⁸⁷

The aforementioned discourses of the Anthropocene map surprisingly well onto the SARS-CoV-2 mediascape and govern meaning-making in predictable ways. Ecocatastrophism can be seen as informing the representational logic of zoonotic disease transfer and global transmission, while experimental mRNA “jabs” and boosters are represented as an innovative crisis management technology. Likewise, eco-modernism informs virus hygiene, masking and distancing campaigns, whose expert messaging and pedagogies nudge behavior with ceaselessly updated “best practices.” Finally, planetary realism, which is distinguished by pessimism regarding viral governance, can be seen in public health authorities’ expressed concerns about ungovernable human and viral conduct, which justify crisis interventions in local circumstances, as illustrated by the previously unthinkable global “lockdowns.”

Planetary realism resonates most profoundly as it captures experts’ equivocations and uncertainties and the surprising presentations of viral mutations that have precluded containment of SARS-CoV-2 in a reassuring crisis narrative, “the one” of technological mastery over nature. A year into the “pandemic” timeline, these excesses trouble the operation of the one expert narrative of accidental zoonotic disease transfer, scientific/medical discovery, and governmental containment through surveillance, quarantine and vaccination. Signifiers such as COVID-19; mRNA Vaccines; SARS-Co-V-2; B.1.351 (UK); P.1 (Brazil); E484K (mutation); L452R; chimeric virus; Wuhan wet market; Wuhan Lab (there are three); Fort Detrick; Event 101; 5G; “Scamdemic;” and “clotshot” circulate virally, often in intensely abstracted and meme-like forms. Ephemeral presentations of viral matter and meaning are ungovernable multiplicities resisting symbolic and algorithmic containment across institutional and virtual spaces. The impossibility of “the one” is experienced as dislocation and derangement. As Derrida said, the time is out of joint.

SARS-CoV-2 material and symbolic excesses belie twentieth-century technological Utopianism and nineteenth-century optimism encoded in the dialectically prophesied end of History. Erosion of the grand Enlightenment narrative of zoonotic disease transfer and containment will likely invigorate eschatology. Bereft of the modernist promise, end-time crisis ideoscapes may flourish, seeing the “Last Judgment” (*xpigt/-krisis* = *judicium*) in the temporal dislocations of viral matter (i.e.,

⁸⁷ Scott Hamilton, “Foucault’s End of History: The Temporality of Governmentality and its End in the Anthropocene,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 3 (2018): 376. DOI: 10.1177/0305829818774892.

mutations) and meanings whose unravellings can only be brought together again in the (one) cataclysm of “eschaton.”⁸⁸ The complex temporality of eschatological crisis already inscribed in contemporary formulations of planetary crisis will no doubt energize efforts both to bring about the desired end times and to preclude it through radical and authoritarian means.⁸⁹ The former messianic approach was pursued in South Korea by the religious group Shincheonji, whose name signifies “new heaven and earth,” with reference to the Book of Revelation, and whose leader seeks to create a “new spiritual Israel” at the end time.⁹⁰ Religious SARS-CoV-2 messianism of this form articulates against scientific-medical katechontism. Whereas messianism emphasizes human agency in accelerating delivery of the utopian promise of salvation, katechontism seeks to postpone the projected end time through directed human agency and technologies. For example, scientific-medical katechontism articulates mRNA vaccination as the pivotal *point de capiton*; that is, as the major signifier securing meaning and matter against the tide of SARS-CoV-2 derangement through the establishment of a new biopolitical order, a new vaccine apartheid, that prohibitively restricts mobilities and economic opportunities. Although seeped in positivist philosophy, scientific-medical mediascapes can reinscribe eschatology, as illustrated in *Los Angeles Times* coverage of an emergent “California” strain of SARS-CoV-2: “‘The devil is already here,’ said Dr. Charles Chiu, who led the UCSF team of geneticists, epidemiologists, statisticians and other scientists in a wide-ranging analysis of a new variant, which they call B.1.427/B.1.429. ‘I wish it were different. But the science is the science.’”⁹¹ The science is the science that tells the world the devil is here.

The Time is Out of Joint

The most concerning aspect of the homogenization of “the one” is that it poses inescapable problems for civil society and democracy more generally. Although the formal concept of “a people,” unified by core constitutional values, history, and a shared vision for the future, is foundational to nationhood, it is ultimately another

⁸⁸ Rothe, “Governing the End Times?”, 157.

⁸⁹ Scott Hamilton, “Foucault’s end of History: The Temporality of Governmentality and its End in the Anthropocene,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 3 (2018): 371–395. DOI: 10.1177/0305829818774892

⁹⁰ Nathan Park, “Cults and Conservatives Spread Coronavirus in South Korea,” *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/27/coronavirus-south-korea-cults-conservatives-china/>.

⁹¹ Melissa Healy, “California’s Coronavirus Strain Looks Increasingly Dangerous: ‘The Devil is Already Here’” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-02-23/california-homegrown-coronavirus-strain-looks-increasingly-transmissible-and-dangerous>.

fictional unification that masks the inherent conflicts of interest and power relations endemic to all human societies and endeavors, including scientific ones. Following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, it is instructive to consider constitutions of the people as ephemeral articulations reflecting shifting alliances enacted communicatively.⁹² Broad constitutions of the people unifying disparate groups are often organized by negations, as illustrated by the populist constitution of the people against societal elites controlling salient reins of power. Distrust of elites unifies otherwise disparate groups, forging equivalences across political particularities. The populist articulation of the people against elites is powerfully destabilizing, and elites will work to re-channel political affect by controlling hegemonic narratives and redirecting targets of outrage. Controlling affective flows is regarded as critical to contemporary crisis management, and the capacity to create hyperrealities disconnected from experience has never been greater for those able to regulate online access and content. However, as Foucault instructed us, control meets resistance and hence even the most sophisticated algorithms of control can be outwitted by human creativity when the goal is sharing alternative knowledge and experiences.

This author's findings on populist SARS-CoV-2 narratives disclosed increasing social distress in online platforms as algorithmic censors interfered with individuals' efforts to share alternative pandemic narratives across 2021 and as news media, such as Politico, reported that "Biden allied groups, including the Democratic National Committee" planned to "engage fact-checkers more aggressively and work with SMS carriers to dispel misinformation about vaccines that is sent over social media and text messages."⁹³ The apparent arbitrary shifting of mainstream and expert accounts of origins and mask policy reinforced counter-speech narratives, as did shifting rules for censorship of references to the "Wuhan lab" on social media sites such as Reddit.⁹⁴ The pandemic paradigm of lockdowns, social-media censorship, and concerted media control amplified alienation and empowered resistance narratives, and in no area were those narratives more affectively charged than with respect to mandatory vaccinations. The authoritarian "jab" has emerged as both a new line of force and rallying call against perceived medical/scientific and governmental tyranny.

Populist outrage expressed in social media comments on alternative platforms grew as institutional authorities were obliged to acknowledge growing vaccine

⁹² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: New Left, 1985).

⁹³ Natasha Korecki and Eugene Daniels. "Potentially A Death Sentence': White House Goes Off on Vaccine Fearmongers." Politico, July 12, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/12/biden-covid-vaccination-campaign-499278>.

⁹⁴ Eugene Volokh, "Social Media Platforms and the Dangers of Censorship Creep," *Reason*, July 7, 2021, <https://reason.com/volokh/2021/07/07/social-media-platforms-and-the-dangers-of-censorship-creep/>.

injuries, including life-threatening blood clots and myocarditis among young people.⁹⁵ Algorithmic censorship of confusing and/or adverse personal vaccine experiences on social media, such as heavy menstrual periods,⁹⁶ amplified concerns about vaccine-induced sterilization as a component of a mass-depopulation campaign. Institutional media campaigning for vaccination as a “patriotic” act⁹⁷ disqualified the unvaccinated as good citizens, while the polarizing comment by Anthony Fauci, Director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, of “two Americas”⁹⁸ emerging around the dualism of vaccinated/unvaccinated was interpreted as signaling institutional war against them in online discussion forums.⁹⁹ Censorship of vaccine criticism by YouTube¹⁰⁰ and targeting of dissident experts, such as occurred with the cancellation and reinstatement of the LinkedIn profile of a co-inventor of mRNA vaccines, Robert Malone,¹⁰¹ who has long studied genetic vectors,¹⁰² added credence to an eschatological counter-public narrative of the “great reset.” The great reset is a unifying trope representing a final war of depopulation perpetrated by elites and their mad-scientist lackeys against the people, whom are left bare without liberal protections of self-ownership and free expression. In a bizarre temporal coincidence, the British pandemic miniseries *Utopia* provided the great reset lexicon, as a global

⁹⁵ (U.S.) Food and Drug Administration (FDA), “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Update,” June 25, 2021, <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-june-25-2021>. See also FDA, “Janssen COVID-19 Vaccine,” February 27, 2021, <https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/janssen-covid-19-vaccine>.

⁹⁶ Corinne Ahrens and Giselle Hengst, “What’s with Periods and Vaccines?” *Ms.*, April 22, 2021, <https://msmagazine.com/2021/04/22/weekly-pulse-periods-menstruation-vaccine-biden-fetal-tissue-chauvin-verdict/>.

⁹⁷ Bill Foster and Mariannette Miller-Meeks, “Getting a COVID-19 Vaccination is a Patriotic Act,” *MSN*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/getting-a-covid-19-vaccination-is-a-patriotic-act-do-it-for-your-family-and-for-america/ar-AALJRnB>.

⁹⁸ Kaelan Deese, “Fauci Predicts there Could be ‘Two Americas’ Between Vaccinated and Unvaccinated Zones,” *Yahoo News*, June 30, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/fauci-predicts-could-two-americas-143800172.html>.

⁹⁹ Tyler Durden, “Fauci: ‘There Are Now Two Americas, The Vaccinated and The Unvaccinated,’” *ZeroHedge* July 1, 2021. <https://www.zerohedge.com/covid-19/fauci-there-are-now-two-americas-vaccinated-unvaccinated>.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Hiltzik, “YouTube is Finally Banning Anti-Vaccination Promoters, But Why Did It Take So Long?” *The Los Angeles Times* September 29, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-09-29/youtube-bans-anti-vax>.

¹⁰¹ Emily Wood, “LinkedIn Reinstates Account of mRNA Vaccine Inventor who Warned of COVID-19 Shot Risk for Kids,” *Christian Post*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/linkedin-reinstates-mrna-vaccine-inventors-account-after-removal-for-questions-on-covid-shot-risks.html>.

¹⁰² Jon A. Wolff, Robert W. Malone, Phillip Williams, Wang Chong, Gyula Acsadi, Agnes Jani, and Philip Felgner, “Direct Gene Transfer into Mouse Muscle in Vivo,” *Science* 247, no. 4949 (1990): 1465-1468. DOI: 10.1126/science.1690918.

elite termed “The Network” are represented as orchestrating a weaponized pandemic in order to sterilize and cull the global population.¹⁰³ Although initially broadcast in the U.K. in 2013-2014, the re-release of this series on streaming services in 2020 articulated a narrative that provided an alternative frame of intelligibility for the unassimilable pandemic elements pondered in conspiratorial online sense-making.

It is a grand crisis in the making wrought by pre-existing institutional inequalities, failed and authoritarian pandemic governance and a triggering agent, the mysterious SARS-CoV-2. A zero-COVID¹⁰⁴ narrative logic promoting virus eradication through novel technologies and strict lockdowns on material and symbolic flows has taken hold as “the one,” coding all opposition as disinformation. An intervention is demanded at the end of history. Crisis must be freed from the reigns of teleology and, following Koselleck and Richter, be acknowledged in relation to political particularities. Crisis must be acknowledged to be constituted in and through multiple expert frameworks and experiential points of view that challenge the “tertiary” power of medical police.¹⁰⁵ In “The Time is Out of Joint: Temporal Disorders in the Late Modern Condition,” Walter Moser suggests multiplicity as the antidote for contemporary temporal disorders, which are “increasingly unavoidable symptoms of a crisis of the modern temporality. This crisis might then prepare the stage for a different temporality, or rather for a plural emergence of temporal alternatives.”¹⁰⁶ The plural emergence of temporal alternatives? What could that mean?

Crisis scholarship can either reinforce a totalizing, albeit internally fractured, narrative through endless schematics of control or can alternatively seek to understand and help build bridges enabling respectful disagreement around the contestations of political particularities. Rather than taking for granted “the one” produced by societal time-keepers, scholarship should acknowledge the multiverse of interpretive and societal possibilities. Instead of prioritizing the doomed quest for transcendent truths in meanings and matter, many in communication studies address

¹⁰³ Dennis Kelly and John Donnelly (writers) and Alex Lopez and Sam Donovan (directors). *Utopia* (film). <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2384811>, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Dennis Normile, “Can ‘Zero COVID’ Countries Continue to Keep the Virus at Bay Once They Reopen?” *Science* 373, Issue 6561. <https://www.science.org/content/article/can-zero-covid-countries-continue-keep-virus-bay-once-they-reopen>.

¹⁰⁵ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Moser, “The Time is Out of Joint: Temporal Disorders in the Late Modern Condition” *Revista de Letras* 43, no. 1 (2003): 17.

the operations of representations, particularly in terms of their power effects.^{107, 108} The impossibility of suturing pandemic narratives indicates unassimilable excesses of meaning whose representations should be identified and analyzed by scholars in terms of those effects, rather than censored. Representations of crisis from the margins signify underexamined and hegemonic and institutional power relations. A critical crisis politics could be conceived as genealogical in the Foucauldian sense, as it aims to disclose subjugated representations whose politics simply diverge from or, alternatively, threaten preferred operationalizations of events, both past and future. Such a genealogy would examine operations of the one and trace “failures” or dislocations with the intent to disclose how excesses of meaning reveal unassimilable crisis elements that challenge the hegemonic timeline enforced through “tertiary spatialization.”¹⁰⁹ Rather than ascertaining their truth status, the crisis genealogist interprets dislocations as symptoms of institutional and symbolic failures of the *one* to resonate with divergent expert interpretations and lived experiences. In sum, crisis genealogies point to failures, dislocations in meaning and matter whose excavations inescapably help transform the political terrain by opening up critique and dialogue regarding the unassimilable horizonlessness, not totalization, of our self-understandings and political strivings.

¹⁰⁷ Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies,” *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 8, no. 2 (2015): 327–333.

¹⁰⁸ Dana Cloud, *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 16.

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