This collection of essays seeks to theorize the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic in international relations (IR). The contributions are driven by questions such as: How can theorizing help us understand these unsettled times? What kind of crisis is this? What shapes its politics? What remains the same and what has been unsettled or unsettling? In addressing such questions, each of the participants considers what we may already know about the pandemic as well as what might be ignored or missed. Collectively, the forum pushes at the interdisciplinary boundaries of IR theorizing itself and, in so doing, the participants hope to engender meaningful understandings of a world in crisis and encourage expansive ways of thinking about the times that lie beyond.

Esta colección de ensayos busca teorizar la política de la pandemia de la COVID-19 en las Relaciones Internacionales (RI). Las contribuciones se basan en preguntas tales como las siguientes: “¿cómo nos puede ayudar la teorización a comprender estos tiempos sin precedentes?,” “¿qué tipo de crisis es esta?,” “¿qué determina su política?,” “¿qué continúa siendo igual y qué ha sido inestable o desestabilizante?” Al abordar estas preguntas, cada uno de los participantes considera lo que posiblemente ya sabemos de la pandemia, así como lo que podría ignorarse o pasar por alto. De manera colectiva, el foro presiona los límites interdisciplinarios de la teorización de las RI en sí y, al hacerlo, los participantes esperan generar entendimientos significativos de un mundo en crisis y alentar formas expansivas de pensar sobre los tiempos que yacen más allá.

Cet ensemble d’essais cherche à théoriser les politiques de pandémie de COVID-19 en relations internationales. Ses contributions sont axées...
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autour de questions telles que: Comment la théorisation peut-elle nous aider à comprendre ces temps troubles? De quel type de crise s’agit-il? Par quoi ses politiques sont-elles façonnées? Quelles sont les choses qui sont restées inchangées et celles qui ont été déstabilisées ou déstabilisantes? Pour aborder ces questions, chacun des participants se livre à une réflexion sur ce que nous savons potentiellement déjà de la pandémie ainsi que sur ce que nous aurions pu manquer ou ignorer. Collectivement, les participants à cette tribune repoussent les limites interdisciplinaires de la théorisation des relations internationales en elle-même et espèrent ainsi engendrer des compréhensions significatives de ce monde en crise et encourager des modes de pensée globaux pour les temps qui nous attendent.

Keywords: IR theory, COVID-19, pandemic, crisis, post-truth, liberalism, nationalism, world order, biopolitics, bodies, post-structuralism, borders, affective experience, embodiment

Palabras clave: teoría de las ri, COVID-19, pandemia, crisis, posverdad, liberalismo, nacionalismo, orden mundial, biopolítica, órganos, posestructuralismo, fronteras, experiencia afectiva, materialización

Mots clés: théorie des relations internationales, COVID-19, pandémie, crise, post-vérité, libéralisme, nationalisme, ordre mondial, biopolitique, organismes, post-structuralisme, frontières, expérience affective, concretization

Introduction to the Forum

Jennifer Sterling-Folker

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2.8 million deaths and counting. Families devastated. Communities in lockdown. Politics roiling. Economies halted. As the COVID-19 pandemic advances, the scramble to understand these processes and their potential aftermath ensues. Newspaper headlines and political pundits are primed to see novelty at every turn, while established theoretical frameworks provide us with potential tools to understand the present and how the future might unfold (Drezner 2020; Fukuyama 2020a). Yet unsettled times are also opportunities to explore new analytical frameworks and reconsider how we theorize and about what. Each of the forum participants is a self-avowed international relations (IR) theorist in its broadest sense and is interested in the diverse conceptual frameworks and epistemological commitments utilized within the discipline for understanding the world around us. As editor of the forum, I asked each of them to consider how they would theorize about the politics and global implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, how can IR theorizing help us understand these unsettling times?

Such a question inevitably brings the theorist back to basics. What kind of crisis is it? What shapes its politics? What might we already know to help us understand it? What seems to be missing or ignored in our prior attempts to theorize the challenges we now face? Annette Freyberg-Inan’s essay sets the stage for these considerations, highlighting what is old and what is new in our understanding of the global politics of a pandemic. The essays that follow, by Jennifer Sterling-Folker, Lauren Wilcox, and Umut Ozguc, respectively, grapple with these questions and each, in their own way, suggests new analytical possibilities in light of the pandemic and thus pushes the interdisciplinary boundaries of IR theorizing itself. Rosemary E. Shinko’s
essay rounds out the forum by circling back to the question of theorizing and the role it might play in the context of a global pandemic. The forum as a whole seeks to engender meaningful understandings of a world in crisis and encourage expansive ways of thinking about the times that lie beyond.

Separating the Old from the New, or the Death of Liberal Order (Not from COVID-19)

Annette Freyberg-Inan

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I have been asked how—as an IR scholar—I understand the COVID-19 pandemic. Since so much has been said and written about it already, I begin by reflecting on what has irritated me most in public discourse on the topic, that is, the widespread tendency to exaggerate the novelty of COVID-19 and everything to do with it. This is not only a problem with respect to this pandemic. For about twenty years, the words “crisis,” “unprecedented,” and “new” have been heavily overused in political discourse. IR scholars, politicians, journalists, and citizens alike seem to perceive what comes to their attention as new, even when it is not, and to hyperbolize the expected impact of these supposedly novel developments. The US news and scholarly sources after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example, were replete with declarations that we were witnessing the dawn of a new era, that the world and international politics would never be the same. Today, Campbell and Doshi (2020) speculate that “the coronavirus could reshape global order”; according to the more definitive Kissinger (2020), “the coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order”; and Fukuyama (2020a) warns that “the pandemic could lead to the United States’ relative decline, the continued erosion of the liberal international order, and a resurgence of fascism around the globe.”

Without wanting to accuse anyone personally, such hyperbole not only transports a scarcity of historical understanding, but also fosters a collective sense of bewilderment and urgency that, in turn, supports hysteria. This cannot but undermine the quality of our response. As Chandler (2020a, 2020b) rather uncritically notes, as a consequence of the current acute sense of crisis, “acting normally, not panicking, not overreacting, is seen as dangerous and hubristic.” This undermines rational decision-making, and it can blind us to other developments that may be more significant.

As scholars of IR, we have the luxury of not needing to sell copies or collect hits. That comes with a responsibility to think before we open our mouths. Our view of world politics should be informed by the longue durée and by a comparative perspective. We should know that, very often, “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” and be more circumspect about declaring novelty. Perhaps Fukuyama (2020b) came closer to the truth on another occasion, when he stated that “the pandemic is not a game changer; it is an accelerator of deep trends that were already at work”. Perhaps, it is not even that.

We should also know that change is a constant as we look through time, that history is change, and that we lose precious time by outguessing each other about where all this will lead that would be better spent responding to the here and now. This is why I find it important to consider what is old and what is new in the current moment and untangle change from continuity to counteract hyperbole. My argument is that the COVID-19 pandemic does not really challenge the IR canon; it can
be understood well enough without resort to new concepts or theories. Rather, it highlights a fundamental societal problem that has crept up in the *longue durée*. It brings into sharp relief the lack of consensus on even basic facts produced in our increasingly fragmented media and academic environment. We need to wake up to the challenge this poses to the authority of science as well as to liberal modes of governance, both of which depend on the possibility of evidence-based reasoned discourse.

What Is Old

Without disputing the obvious facts that the novel coronavirus causes suffering and poses a range of policy challenges (e.g., see Barua 2020), it is good to begin this reflection with an essential reminder: viral outbreaks are a normal part of biological life on planet Earth. It is not the slightest bit odd that a heretofore unstudied form of the coronavirus should begin to affect humans, and it is obvious that humanity should struggle to control and manage the resulting epidemic. Biology has affected the rise and fall of prior civilizations—why should ours be any different? Not only do we have a literature on *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond 1997) that diseases have always mattered in world history, but there is also insightful previous literature on the political impact of pandemics. Most notably, Aaltola (2011) has examined the role played by health anxiety and governments’ ability to protect their citizens from infectious disease for the legitimation of the modern state.

It should furthermore surprise no one that this epidemic became a pandemic, and thereby a global concern. Notwithstanding all ongoing disputes about just how new or “deep” globalization really is, people do move around more and in greater numbers than ever. As Harvey (2020) has recently put it, “one of the downsides of increasing globalization is how impossible it is to stop a rapid international diffusion of new diseases. We live in a highly connected world where almost everyone travels. The human networks for potential diffusion are vast and open.” Luckily, trans- and international governance, further features of globalization, are also still around to help us respond to this pandemic. For example, the UN’s World Health Organization (WHO) works to monitor, inform, advise, and help coordinate efforts to contain the spread and mobilize medical responses. Many other multilateral and bilateral fora facilitate the regulation of mobility across borders or the sharing of medical resources, among a host of other measures.

What we can see, more generally speaking, is that the present crisis unfolds not in a new world but very much in our old one, with pre-existing structures, processes, and dominant ideas. We still have a capitalist world economy, at least by most accounts (cf. Wark 2019), more and less affluent nation-states, more and less democratic governments, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations operating in a multilevel governance system. We also maintain dominant ideologies that continue to shape our policy responses. For example, in both the United States and the Netherlands we can see how difficult our liberal bias makes it to respond to the pandemic the way China did (for better or for worse). In short, many of the basic elements that explain international and national political outcomes—structures, processes, and ideas—have not changed.

Globalization has helped make the novel coronavirus a global problem. Globalization also provides some means to address it. Still, as pointed out in Sterling-Folker’s contribution, policy responses have overwhelmingly been developed at national and subnational levels. That also is not surprising. In crisis, under time pressure, people deal with what is in front of them. It takes enormous effort in such a situation to keep a bigger picture in mind, to operate strategically, and additional effort to convince others to do the same. In the European Union, where I live, we can see this quite clearly. Initial responses were national level and largely uncoordinated. It took several months for the first significant coordinated policies
As a result, just as other features of globalization are not evenly spread across the globe, neither are the problems caused by this pandemic nor their solutions, as the forum contributions by Wilcox and Ozguc underscore. Rates of contagion and mortality rates differ substantially across and even within states. Undoubtedly, many future studies will examine the causes of these differences. What seems prima facie plausible is that, next to population density, levels of state control and societal cohesion matter for contagion rates (Brzechczyn 2020), and the quantity and quality of medical infrastructure matter for mortality rates (Liang et al. 2020). Compliance with restrictions is greater where enforcement is tougher or societal cohesion is stronger—the two typically being inversely correlated. More IC beds, ventilators, and doctors are better than fewer. Medical insurance coverage and better funded health care systems help save lives, especially among the lower classes. All of that seems predictable.

Another old hat is that, as with anything that arouses strong feelings in people, a health crisis is instrumentalized by some political agents for political gain. The political game is, after all, also still the same. Whether it is attacking a rival country’s crisis management, placing blame on the WHO simultaneously (and oddly) as an ineffective and dangerous layer of supranational governance, or using the outbreak to weaponize electoral campaigns—none of this comes as a surprise to students of politics. In this context, we have little to gain from waxing hysterical about “medical populists” popping up everywhere (e.g., Lasco 2020). Politicians simplifying complex issues to attract voters, demonizing their political enemies, and claiming to have a monopoly on the solutions is hardly new. Neither is the securitization of health concerns (Chandler 2020b; Hoffman 2020).

Last but not least, it is not new that a health-related problem becomes a health scare. Here as elsewhere in (international) politics, we should not underestimate the relevance of fear as a basic driving force of human behavior (Jacobi and Freyberg-Inan 2015; Pashakhanlou 2017). All over the world, citizens and elites have reacted with fear of the virus itself and fear of the expected results of measures taken against it. The balance between those fears largely seems to determine whether individuals find the measures taken in their environment too strict, or not strict enough. Simply put, if my more immediate fear is that my family will starve if I don’t go out to work, I will likely oppose a lockdown. If I can comfortably sit out a lockdown in my villa, I will shake my head at those other, apparently irrational people. Both camps, and anyone in between, are furthermore targeted by the manipulations of the instrumentalizers. And all seek cognitive consistency and confirmation, which leads them to embrace some news and not others. The extent and salience of this cognitive social fragmentation, however, are new.

What is New

Since the advent of Web 2.0 around the year 2004, user-generated content has flooded the media sphere and public discourse. This has the ostensibly positive effect that politically powerful actors, such as national governments, have a more difficult time constructing a dominant narrative to interpret events and guide reactions to them. The early 2020 COVID-19 months provided plenty of opportunity to watch them try, arguably with surprising levels of success, initially. Yet in many countries we have been able to observe that, as the initial shock subsided, alternative narratives began to multiply. Aside from ludicrous alternative theories to explain
or deny the outbreak, what is more problematic is the public diversity of competing views on how we should react. This fragmentation is problematic because it legitimates a wide range of possible responses, from total lockdown to allowing the outbreak to freely run its course. It then becomes very difficult to decide what, collectively, should be done. From this follows that attempts to enforce a collective reading and response will be seen as infringing on liberty. This, effectively, makes liberal government impossible.

In Western liberal democracies, the original impulse of liberalism—the idea that private lives should unfold without excessive public interference—has combined with hyperindividualism and the resulting epistemic relativism to support a sense that anyone’s ideas are as good as anybody else’s. The social sciences have played their part in this development with the increasing room given to non-founderalist approaches since the 1970s. The contribution by Shinko in this forum can serve as a self-aware illustration for this type of scholarship. Non-founderalist scholarship rightfully emphasizes the role of subjective experience and perception in the social construction of our empirical reality. Yet this simultaneously complicates the construction of a shared version of such a reality. The impulse of questioning knowledge claims, including our own, is of course not in and of itself wrong. But it creates two linked problems that have now become highly salient. First, it creates a generalized sense of epistemic disorientation. Second, it undermines the possibilities for scholarship to alleviate this disorientation and to inform decision-making. This has helped foster cognitive social fragmentation, insularity, and polarization. We live in different realities, interact less and less in meaningful ways with others, and lose the basis on which to agree on collective action.

Post-factual politics, also known as post-truth or post-reality, is a combined result of these sociocultural developments along with technological innovations like social media, which facilitate the spread of just anyone’s ideas. What is “real” is increasingly up for interpretation and ideologized. The problem of “fake news” is then created by the very fact that their fakeness is disputed, feeding further societal division. COVID-19 times constitute a particularly “futile ground for the spread of false news,” because we find ourselves in a “situation of crisis, uncertain futures, collective shock, and the collective fear of death” (Fuchs 2020). Social distancing furthers this unwholesome trend through “the substitution of face-to-face communication that bears the risk of contagion by mediated communication” as well as the “convergence of social spaces in the home” (Fuchs 2020). This makes it possible that otherwise sane people discursively organize in bubbles to, for example, link cellular networks to a zoonotic virus. It makes things worse if leaders of powerful states or influential media outlets like Breitbart embrace this trend. Not only does post-factualism diminish trust in what governments say, in governmental authority, but it also decreases trust in the authority of science, even of hard science. In the COVID-19 crisis, the virus itself is ideologized and thereby removed from the scientific domain. Virologists lose their authority as well.

Liberal democratic elites have, in a way, asked for this loss of authority, and even continue to encourage it, as can be seen in the extremely cautious, if not incoherent, responses of liberal democratic governments to the COVID-19 crisis. These elites strive not to give the impression of an authoritarian response; the problem is that this also precludes an authoritative response. Faith in government is thereby further undermined. This cannot but go very wrong for liberalism. Enemies of liberalism have already been emerging within, like cancer—from cancel culture to corporate censorship of public forums. Now even an ostensibly liberal scholar like Sikkink (2020) can argue that “to protect our collective right to health in the current pandemic situation, we need to balance our individual rights with collective responsibilities.” This concedes vast ground to communitarianism: the idea that individuals have duties to a collective that can legitimately curtail their freedom. It shows just how deep a crisis liberalism is in, not merely as a system of
governance, but as a normative foundation of our civilization. Perhaps, in the longer term, this will turn out to be the most significant aspect of these historical times: Liberal government requires science to uphold evidence-based reasoned discourse on which to base decisions. Science requires liberal government to uphold freedom of inquiry and expression. We might just be witnessing them going down together.

Nationalism, World Order, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As with any global crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a degree of hype in American news media over its implications for world order. Headlines such as “Pandemic Could Reshape the World Order” (Robertson 2020), “The World Order Is Dead. Here’s How to Build a New One for a Post-Coronavirus Era” (Fishman 2020), and “China Doesn’t Want a New World Order. It Wants This One” (Gokhale 2020) imply that a fundamental reordering of world politics is afoot. Yet whether one thinks COVID-19 will reshape world order rather depends on what one thought world order was in the first place.

Most American scholars tend to define world order in terms of relative power, with a focus on post–Cold War unipolarity or hegemonic stability, and emphasize American leadership within that context (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth 2009; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019). America is the essential power from this perspective, and its failure to lead during this pandemic is indeed a crisis of world order. Others subscribe to the vision of a “liberal world order” (LWO), one characterized by normative commitments to interdependent capitalist markets, democratic states, cooperative global institutions, multilateralism, and a multiplicity of non-state actors and authorities who participate in global governance and global civil society (Weiss and Wilkinson 2014; Sterling-Folker 2015; Pabst 2018). The analytical jury is still out on whether this order needs the United States as its leader, but the 2016 Brexit referendum and Trump election were widely viewed as serious threats to it, and COVID-19 only compounded the sense of dread (Ikenberry, Parmar, and Stokes 2018). These perspectives tell us why we should worry, but they do not tell us very much about the politics of COVID-19 itself. In fact, logically they suggest we should not be in crisis at all, because either the United States should have led or other states and actors stepped into the breach.

When one stands back from American shores, these visions of world order seem narrow in both their emphasis on American power and the implicit assumption that we live in a world of sovereign, territorially bound nation-states, commonly referred to as the Westphalian world order. The latter assumption is relatively clear in the polarity and hegemonic stability literature, which moves directly to a discussion of relative power among nation-states, and the United States in particular, with little contemplation of whether the nation-state, as the foundation for contemporary world order, might be changing. LWO scholarship also tends to ground itself in a world of nation-states by assuming the Westphalian state as a sort of ideal type that serves, as Schmidt (2011, 615, 617) has put it, as a “conceptual foil” and “baseline for change.” Thus, the debate over whether Westphalia remains unchanged or has been reshaped by liberal hegemony is, as Navari (2007, 594–95) observes, really a debate about the nation-state as the dominant species producing world order; it is not about the genus of world order itself.
This narrow focus on the nation-state opens the IR discipline up to the charge of “methodological nationalism,” that is, taking the nation and society as pre-given units and so adopting analytical blinders that miss other important phenomena (Wimmer and Schiller 2003). Yet, as Wight (2010) has observed, it is not entirely clear how well this criticism, which originated in sociology, applies to the IR discipline at large, where many scholars have already problematized the inside–outside distinction. Alternatively, there is a case to be made that the IR discipline is guilty not of “methodological nationalism” but of “methodological statism” in its tendency to conflate the nation with the state, as if the two were naturally coterminous. Despite Connor (1978) warning 40+ years ago that the state and the nation are not the same thing, Berenskoetter (2014, 263) notes that “IR scholars issue periodic reminders that phenomena of nationalism remain worth studying ... still, it is common in the IR literature to collapse the nation into the state by conveniently assuming that the former is supervened by the latter.”

This is not to suggest that IR scholars have entirely ignored nationalism’s role in international events and outcomes. IR scholarship paid considerable attention to the subject in the 1990s as the former Yugoslavia fell apart, with ethnic nationalism widely viewed to be the conflict’s root cause. But as Berenskoetter (2014, 263) continues more recently, “while most IR scholars recognize the need to open the black box of the state, few explore the configuration of the community underpinning it.” Similarly, Carlson (2020, 7) observes in a 2020 H-Diplo teaching forum on nationalism that, when considering the nation-state, IR “scholars have tended to emphasize the Westphalian side of this structural pairing, but have not given its nationalist counterpart its proper due,” which is why the topic is more often left to comparativists. There is, in addition, a tendency to treat nationalism’s more contemporary manifestations as an aberrant, malevolent, and disruptive force that ultimately must be contained by states (Griffiths and Sullivan 1997; Hechter 2000). This then “underestimates the value and power of nationalism as an emotion,” as Dalay (2015) notes, as well as the more banal, even positive role it plays in reinforcing contemporary collective identity within nation-states and which serves as a necessary bedrock for democracy (Calhoun 2017, 26).

Thinking about nationalism as a banal, latent, or everyday practice opens up new analytical possibilities while shedding light on the global politics of the COVID-19 pandemic itself. By revisiting the obvious point that “a state is an apparatus of governance and a nation is a cultural community; these are two very different kinds of human groupings” (Nimni 2010, 55), we begin to see why “there can be no simple overlap between state and nation, whatever the mainstream literature on the nation-state may suggest” (Resnick 2012, 75). From this perspective, contemporary nationalism is not a matter of state policy per se but a sedimented cultural practice that inheres to our daily lives. This sedimentation can go largely unnoticed for extended periods but, like seeds waiting for the warmth of a spring Sun, nationalism can be activated, becoming more obvious and unsettled, in opportune conditions. Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic present such conditions, as Bieber’s (2020) analysis of nationalism during the pandemic underscores (see also Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2020). And because we tend to think of nationalism as a nasty aberration, we are often surprised at its observable resurgence in times of crisis, but as Heiskanen (2019, 317) warns us, “any eruption of nationalism on the international stage is merely the materialization of a specter that is always-already at work.”

To understand how this happens, we can turn to the insights of nationalism scholars such as Billig, Özkirmli, Calhoun, Malešević, and Bonikowski to think of nationalism not as an elite movement ideology, an individual identity, or an occasional aberration, but as a dominant discursive structure involving Anderson’s (2016) “imagined community” that operates to naturalize and reproduce itself in everyday practice. As an everyday practice, nationalism operates subterraneously, in
Özkirimli’s (2017, 5) words, as “the fundamental organizing principle of interstate order, as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, as the taken-for-granted context of everyday life and as a readily available cognitive and discursive frame to make sense of the world that surrounds us.”

Billig (1995, 6) was the first to argue that it is “banal” in this sense, not as “an intermittent mood in establishing nations,” but as an “endemic condition.” Building on this insight, scholars now argue that nationalism is a hegemonic discursive structure involving social solidarity in relation to familiar concepts such as territory, sovereignty, culture, and so on. They argue that nationalism needs to be studied as an affective phenomenon that is analytically and empirically different from states. Indeed, many nationalism scholars concur with Nimni (2010, 63) that “we are experiencing a slow but clear bifurcation between the attributes of the state and the attributes of the nation.” This suggests that nationalism, like the Westphalia sovereign state, may constitute a world order genus in its own right and there are benefits of studying it as such.

A nationalist world order is shaped by nationalism’s own dialectic qualities. As Calhoun (2007, 39) notes, nationalism constructs groups, “both as a way of looking at the world as a whole and as a way of establishing group identity from within.” It makes the normative political claim that human populations across the planet should be organized to ensure a match between nation and sovereign state, in what Mandelbaum (2016) and Heiskanen (2019, 324) have called, “the fantasy of the congruent nation-state.” Simultaneously, it presumes that this match unproblematically resolves normative claims about “who properly belongs together in a society” as well as “moral obligations to the nation as a whole” (Calhoun 2007, 39). National discourse presents nations as unified, stable, obvious, and settled entities, when in fact they are social constructs that are ambiguous, contentious, and forever in motion. In this sense, nationalism is, as Calhoun (2007, 40) notes, “a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness, but also is problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions.” Vertically, that is, within nation-states, nationalism provokes questions over who or what constitutes the “true” nation, who has rights and responsibilities within that context, and whom the state should primarily serve. Horizontally, across nation-states, nationalism reinforces the division of humanity into these socially constructed units and, as a shared ideology, is, as many nationalism scholars have observed, the original cosmopolitanism.

This means IR’s standard inside–outside distinction is embedded in nationalism’s discursive structure and is the dominant, universal way of framing both the world and its politics (Heiskanen 2019, 318). Because, as Berenskoetter (2014, 262) notes, “politics is found in the creative and contested attempts to link these dimensions to a coherent narrative on both the domestic and international level,” it is also where we should situate the politics of COVID-19. As a universally shared idea about how human groupings should be organized horizontally, nationalism produces shared ideas and behavioral patterns across nation-states. When confronted with a disease that is transnational and non-territorial by nature, the response was narrow, nationalist and territorial, with borders closed to the movement of designated non-nationals, finger-pointing at which external populations were to blame for the outbreak, ongoing comparative assessments of how different nation-states were containing the outbreak, and, with the advent of vaccines, ongoing practices of “vaccine nationalism.” Such assessments reflect the fundamental parameters of the contemporary world order in which we live. Because the state justifies its existence in service of a tiny fraction of humanity, a world of sovereign nation-states is indeed a world of self-obsessed entities who care primarily about their own populations and those of other nation-states only in relation to their own, as realists have long argued.

Yet this mental horizon cannot be traced merely to an external anarchic environment; instead, it is, as Malešević (2020) has put it, “the dominant operative ideology
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of modernity.”¹ That is, “we are now all born, work, live and die in the polities that justify their existence through the idea that the nationhood (sic) is the ultimate form of collective solidarity and political legitimacy” (Malešević 2020). As a dominant discursive, and vertical structure, nationalism is embedded in our institutions, daily processes, everyday practices, and mental horizons, with individuals socialized as children to imagine the world as nationally bounded, with societal institutions such as education, the media, and governments reifying the separation between the national and the non-national, and internationally where sovereign territorially bound nation-states insist that they will only recognize like units. In such a world order, borders are not just lines on a map but result from the social construction of imagined, bounded communities, making it difficult to achieve the kind of borderless “affective experience” Ozguc proposes later in this forum. Nor are such communities amenable to the kind of rationalist, instrumental change long imagined by liberal cosmopolitanists (Sterling-Folker 1997); COVID-19 has underscored just how far we have been from that sort of universal liberal vision.

Simultaneously, COVID-19 challenges nation-states internally because state authority and legitimacy for both democracies and authoritarian regimes are gained by claiming to protect and represent the will of their own people, not the people of other nation-states. And yet in this instance, an unknown, deadly disease challenges even the most competent states and the populations they claim to serve. As Wilcox’s contribution underscores, it lays bare the fiction that only states can provide safety and security for their own populations, it raises fundamental questions about who exactly constitutes the “people” the state is supposed to save and protect, and it underscores the ambiguities of the nation itself, that fiction of a unified and seamless body that shares common attributes and thus thinks and acts in concert to the benefit of all its members. In the United States, this precipitated a near free-fall in the politics of national unity and federal control, at a time when, in Bonikowski’s (2016, 429) terms, there was already “heightened national self-awareness.” Teetering due to years of Republican political mismanagement, rampant conspiracy thinking (itself reliant on banal nationalism according to Malešević 2020), and white nationalist provocations, the fiction that America was a unified nation served by a liberal, racially neutral, benign paternalistic state was pushed over the edge by a disease that quickly became politicized, as Freyberg-Inan’s contribution highlights. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an existing, racialized internal struggle within the United States over who and what constitutes the American national polity and thus for whom and what purpose the state serves.

This is just the American story, of particular interest to many due to its historical role in global affairs, but pre-COVID-19 Brexit may be read in similar terms. Each nation will have its own unique story to tell during this pandemic about its imagined national community and its relationship with the state, because each is, as Berenskoetter (2014, 262) has put it, a “bounded community constituted by a biographical narrative which gives meaning to its collective spatio-temporal situatedness.” Yet patterns across nation-states will also emerge due to nationalism’s horizontal qualities as a shared ideology of modernity. Such patterns are also influenced by ongoing global inequalities that produce, in Castles’ (2007, 218) assessment, a hierarchy of global rights and new forms of transnational racism that are informed by nationalism as a hegemonic discursive structure about who belongs where and in what order. That your skin color and gender figure into this hegemonic equation, and that individual bodies are caught in the cross-fire both literally and figuratively as the forum contributions by Wilcox, Ozguc, and Shinko eloquently attest, should come as no surprise. The nation has always been about social cohesion, not the individual, and despite the ongoing analytical claims of liberal apologists. By

¹ This then raises the thorny question for realists regarding the extent to which world order patterns are traceable to either ahistorical group interaction or a historically situated type of group that has come to dominate the system.
reconsidering nationalism from a banal, everyday practice perspective, we can bet-

**The Biopolitics of the Wars on COVID-19**

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The emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the centrality to con-
temporary life of bodies and of biopolitics, a key concept for a generation or more
of critical IR scholars that describe the ways in which bodies, their components,
and the health of populations are the targets of politics (Wilcox 2015, 2019). Many
of the key dilemmas of the pandemic involve such questions: how to care for the
ill, how people caring for the ill might protect themselves, how treatments might
be developed, and how economies might survive without people gathered together
in factories, offices, public transportation, stores, theaters, and restaurants. Related
questions about how children might learn, who will teach them when schools and
nurseries are closed, and many more draw attention to the ways in which we are
bodily dependent upon one another: as individuals, as families, as communities,
states, and globally as well.

In this world of bodily precarity and mutual dependence, as Shinko also discusses
below, the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the disease it causes when humans are infected,
COVID-19, are frequently portrayed as enemies in a war requiring great sacrifice to
defeat. The language of the virus as invader and the state at war with it has dom-
ninated the discourse in many states, reproducing the inside/outside borders that
constitute the state as the main, unitary actor in IR, and the borders of the body as
analogous to those of the nation-state as Sterling-Folker notes above. Yet, as Ozguc
also notes below, these and other representations of bodies and borders are not in-
nocent. These means of thinking about the state, the body, and its “others” have a
history and consequences for our thinking about the pandemic in global politics.

In *Contagious*, Wald (2008, 180) describes how the language of the virus’s agency as
an *invader* became a staple of the scientific literature. The understanding of viruses
as a “primitive means of information transfer” and “the body as a communication
system that viruses could hijack” (Wald 2008, 182) emerged from the postwar histo-
ries of information theory, virology, and Cold War ideology. Scientific and popular
imaginations of “the immune system” reflect the underlying political and economic
structures and anxieties, primarily around how “difference” is managed. Haraway
(1991) writes, “the immune system is an elaborate icon for principal systems of sym-
bo

The roots of the immune system discourse precede the specificities of the high-
tech era Haraway discusses. As Ozguc discusses, *immunitas*, as seen in the works
of Esposito and Cohen (2009), shaped modern personhood via the legal and politi-
cal discourses of self-defense and immunity, designating who was subjected to the
same obligations and penalties as others, long before they were biological concepts.
In reference to the pandemic (and not the continuation of the US-led military
missions in Iraq and Afghanistan), American President Trump described himself as a “wartime president” (Smith 2020). Merging the discourse of invasion and defense with the Brexit-era nationalistic pride built upon very selective (mis)readings of the past, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared in October 2020: “Your government is working night and day to repel this virus and we will succeed just as this country has seen off every alien invader for the last thousand years” (“U.K.’s Johnson” 2020).

The story of the virus as “invasion” and “defense” requiring hypermasculine, invulnerable leaders might have been challenged by the infection of right-wing leaders with histories of downplaying the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic: Bolsonaro in Brazil, Johnson in the UK, and Trump in the United States. Yet, these leaders turned their apparent bodily vulnerability to the virus into a further vindication of their strength and leadership (Trump tearing his mask off on the White House balcony or Johnson doing press-ups). The health of the leader stands in for the health of the state, while those leaders, and those close to them, openly defy public health guidelines, immune from the law (Purnell 2020). The metaphor of the state as body to be protected from invaders is itself an actant, as Fishel (2017) presciently details in The Microbial State, that aids in promoting a warlike relationship between humans and their others (including those deemed not fully human) and neglects our interdependence.

Biopolitics, as the governance of bodily health of populations, requires a “negative” biopolitics, that is, the abandonment of some lives and/or deliberate targeting and killing of some in order to strengthen the health of others and the polity. Certain groups of people are disproportionately likely to suffer from COVID-19, in terms of the disease itself and from the economic effects of the pandemic: those who have been subjected to the “negative” side of biopolitics and deemed sacrificial, and those whose lives are deemed expendable so that others might live. The “war” analogy has enabled the replacement of technical and medical staff with military officials in Brazil (Pfrimer and Barbosa 2020) and, perhaps most strikingly, the designation of those deemed disposable as, ironically, “essential” and “frontline” workers. The outcome of labeling certain persons as “essential workers” has been, in many cases, to force them to choose between risking their lives and those in their households or quitting their jobs, making them ineligible for unemployment benefits. In this way, the contemporary politics of the COVID-19 pandemic in many states resembles Mbembe’s (2019, 92) analysis of the necropolitics of settler colonialism, in that the colony, and in particular the plantation, gave rise to contemporary necropolitical practices in which “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead.”

While Mbembe locates forms of “the camp” such as prisons, favelas, refugee camps, and ghettos as forms of governing spaces, controlling and potentially killing the people within them, the necropolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic played out spatially, both in the precarity and abandonment of prison populations and the aged and disabled in care homes and in a kind of radical exposure. It effectively forced the disproportionately marginalized into risking their lives as “essential workers” and the denial of government intervention that would allow already precarious people, especially the working class, the ability to remain sheltered and isolated. Rather than the biopolitical logic of letting some die so that others might live, the necropolitical logic is combined with racial capitalism, which describes the extraction of value from racialized bodies. While the health, safety, and security of some was maintained by “sheltering in place,” the labor of other bodies—working class, Black and Brown people, and women—sustained the economic system that provides physical necessities for all, while the wealthiest (including Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates) have enjoyed massive profits.
In the United States, women left the labor market at four times the rate of men: women bore the brunt of managing children’s schooling and care when schools and day-care centers closed (Hoff 2020). Black and immigrant community members contracted and died of the coronavirus at higher rates than white Canadians (Zajacova et al. 2020). The UK’s Office of National Statistics found that ethnic minorities were more likely to suffer from COVID-19 and Black people were 2–2.5 times as likely as white people to die of COVID-19 (ONS 2020). In the United States, Native Americans, Black people, and Latino/a/x people were hospitalized at three to four times the rates of white people, dying at rates twice as high or more than white people (CDC 2021).

The term “frontline” worker is often used interchangeably with “essential worker.” “Frontline” here continues the pandemic-as-war metaphor. To be a “frontline worker” was to be a soldier at the frontlines of a battle (and thus, it is also a spatial metaphor about which bodies are to be most at risk of injury and death). The designation of “essential” or “frontline” worker has functioned precisely to render such lives and such bodies inessential. Declared Walmart cashier Jennifer Suggs: “We’re not essential. We’re sacrificial [...] I will be replaced if I die from this. I don’t have a mask or gloves. The only thing I have is a stupid blue vest” (quoted in Lavin 2020).

The UK’s practice of clapping for NHS workers at 8 p.m. on Thursdays intended to show gratitude and respect, meanwhile health workers were being denied raises or more just working conditions. The work of the war analogy in making a great many lives not only sacrificial but, in all practicality, demanding their sacrifice renders the class, racial, and gendered structures of the social and political order all the more visible. Discussions of approaching the COVID-19 pandemic through a “herd immunity” strategy—not through forthcoming vaccines but through the infection of many millions of people in the hopes that they would recover, become immune, and therefore able to work and support the economy without the need for further government interventions—illustrates all too well the willingness of some governments and their supporters to “sacrifice” certain lives rather than take policy steps to manage the spread of the disease and its impact.

All of these strategies are linked to a concept of acceptable deaths; however, unlike some classical articulations of biopolitics, certain people are sacrificed not for the rest of the population per se, but for the sake of the economy: working class people, disproportionately racialized minorities, whose livelihoods depend upon working in food processing facilities, health care, and public service roles such as bus drivers, grocery store workers, etc. The same systemic racism also makes Black and Brown people much more likely to live in crowded housing and multigenerational homes, not to mention much higher rates of incarceration, contributing to their disproportionate suffering from the virus. Medical discrimination also plays a role: as Rogers (2020) argues, “the coronavirus in black America is not merely the result of a lack of access to good health care, but it is also due to the way racial bias structures physician engagement with black people.” Women disproportionately bear the burden of the “crisis of care” in which the lack of child care and in-person schooling has made it even more difficult for women to engage in paying work; their careers and ability to support their families are most likely to be sacrificed.

In such times, it is perhaps no surprise that several months into the pandemic there would be renewed protests over the killing of Black and Brown people by officers of the state, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN, USA, by a police officer kneeling on his neck while he gasped for air and said repeatedly “I can’t breathe.” Mbembe’s (2020) recent point about the long history of attacking the respiratory tract, having constrained “entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression,” connects the struggle against police violence to the struggle against racial capitalism more broadly—a link made clear by the struggle for life-giving air. A recent article in Cardiovascular Research argues that air pollution shortens people’s lives on a
global level, at a scale greater than that of war and violence, and to a greater extent than other diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, or smoking. The degradation of the planet, particularly its atmosphere, shows up here not only in climate change, but also in increased susceptibility to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, yet these vulnerabilities are not evenly distributed. Scholars and activists on environmental racism stress that the racialized inequalities of health vulnerabilities caused by exposure to toxins reflect the unequal value placed on non-white lives in the deep structures of racial capitalism (Pulido 2017).

The fate of “essential workers” and the connection to deep structures of inequality suggest an analysis of biopolitics that is not precisely Foucault’s biopolitics (founded as it was on the techniques of epidemic management) or state racism distinguishing between the biopolitical investment in the life of the population and the sovereign right to kill as the “break between what must live and what must die” (Foucault 2003, 254). Nor is it Mbembe’s necropolitics of creating death in forms of life. Puar’s (2017, xvii) analysis of injuring, maiming, and sickening, in addition to the poles of life and death, presents a broader biopolitical framework for thinking about “debility”—a concept that, apart from (and yet in relation to) “disability,” “addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather the epidemic or exceptional, and reflect a need for rethinking overarching structures of working, schooling, and living rather than relying on rights frames to provide accommodationist solutions.” Puar’s reading of biopolitics as a theory of bodily capacity and debility provides an additional guide for thinking through the bodily politics of this moment.

A concept of “debility” does not require persons to identify as “disabled” according to state-based forms of rights, recognition, and accommodation. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be things labeled as “co-morbidities” or “risk factors,” such as age, weight, whether someone is immunocompromised, has a pre-existing health condition, or those affected by air pollution and susceptibility to heart and lung conditions. We also need to fold in those who have been rendered expendable: the elderly, care home residents, the homeless, the incarcerated, and those deemed “essential workers” including many who care for these people. For Puar (2017, 92), the politics of debilitation renders some people unworthy of health, as economically burdensome, and as “object of un-care” through whom value and profit may be extracted. It may include those who do recover from COVID-19 but are susceptible to long-term symptoms not fully explained, such as “brain fog,” with difficulty concentrating, memory loss, and dizziness that impairs their normal functioning, including ability to work (Belluck 2020). By focusing on the multiple forms of bodily capacitation and debilitation that this pandemic has both caused and cast into the spotlight, we might move toward a theory of biopolitics, bodies, and the international order. Such a theory would help us understand the roots of such a politics in the destruction of the planet, in racial capitalism, and in the devaluing of the work and lives of so many.

**Pandemics, (Im)Mobility, and Theorizing Borders in IR**

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The concept of the border is a “blindspot in International Relations theory,” writes Vaughan-Williams (2012, 4–8). Goettlich (2019) similarly argues that in IR,
borders have always been understood in a narrow sense, associated with a linear
definition of territory, modern state, and sovereignty. IR’s obsession with the “West-
phalian package,” as Goettlich (2019) rightly suggests, did not leave much room
to shake the static image of the border. Traditional approaches have framed bor-
ders as administrative, regulative lines, and as “hard-shell fortifications” represent-
ing the impermeability of the corporeal and normative being of the state (Herz
1957, 1968). As Jackson wrote, “state borders are usually taken for granted by in-
ternational relations. They are a point of departure, but they are not a subject of
inquiry” (quoted in Vaughan-Williams 2012, 4). Ironically, IR has always been silent
on the question of the border, simply because it has depicted the border as a taken-
for-granted line that has an imaginary power over our lives. Certainly, over the last
four decades such state-centrism has been broadly challenged by critical IR scholars.
Nevertheless, as Vaughan-Williams (2012) suggests, IR still predominantly concep-
tualizes the border as an essential constructive apparatus of the modern geopolitical
imaginary.

Such descriptions of the border are not innocent representations. As a political
practice, knowledge creates its own power by circulating certain representations
within a social, cultural, and political field, thereby making these representations
appear as evident realities. IR is a political practice; it has created its own “politics of
truth” by normalizing the interior of state territory as representative of spatial and
temporal unity fostering order and control. In doing so, traditional perspectives
have contributed to an essentialized view of the border perceived as a constitutive
and regulatory element of the modern state system. As Sterling-Folker suggests in
this forum, IR’s “methodological nationalism” contributes to this idealized image of
the “international” characterized by sharp inside–outside distinctions.

IR’s silence on the concept of the border, I argue, has a performative force in
a way that it deeply shapes the ways in which we learn and teach IR itself. Such si-
lence not only determines how we condition ourselves to think of some concepts
such as chaos, anarchy, and outside in negative ways. It also shapes how we, as IR
scholars, communicate with each other and with our students. I argue that the
absence of the border in theorizing IR forms disciplinary boundaries that define
what IR is/not, which debates require our attention for inquiry, which voices are
privileged, and which questions need to be included or excluded in our curricula.
IR’s silence deeply shapes how we understand the imaginary international that has
been created and defended by IR as a discipline, and the linear thinking that gave
birth to that imaginary construction. I call this silence the “constitutive absence” of
the border in our learning and teaching of IR—how the absence of the concept
of the border shapes the ways in which we think, write, and teach global politics.
This silence makes us ignore the essentially violent nature of borders and their
everydayness.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents us with an opportunity to rethink how we learn
and teach IR in relation to the concept of the border, its everydayness, and its fun-
damental violence. The border is an affective experience produced by our every-
day movements, narratives, and codes that simultaneously define our relations with
the world. As an affective experience, the border changes our perception of time
and space and is altered by those perceptions. For some, borders are everywhere.
For others, they are imperceptible. That is why, as Mbembe (2019, 99) suggests, it
is necessary to talk about the process of “borderization”—how certain spaces are
turned into “impassable places” for certain people, while always being accessible
to others. This essay is about how, during the current public health crisis, certain
bodies are turned into a border between life and death and how different practices
of “borderization” continue to operate to intensify global inequalities, racism, and
exclusionary politics. My aim is to show why the current crisis acts as a wake-up call
to unlearn IR’s static narratives and why we need to remember those who experience
the violence of the border.
“Disposable Bodies” of Pandemic Borders

In late March 2020, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Human Rights Watch (2020) reported that Greece unlawfully detained nearly 2,000 asylum seekers in two overcrowded detention sites. Doctors Without Borders called for the evacuation of refugee camps on Lesbos, Greece, after the first confirmed case on the island in March. A year later, no improvement had been made in these camps. As United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees repeatedly stresses, due to exclusionary bordering practices both between and within states, asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced and stateless people are the ones who are affected most by the current pandemic. And yet Frontex (2021), the key European Border and Coast Guard Agency, keeps declaring “illegal migration” as one of the main threats to sovereign borders. It reports that the number of “illegal border crossing” dropped 13 percent due to COVID-19 restrictions but does not ask what happened to those people and where they shelter in the midst of the pandemic. In the current crisis, refugees, once again, have been turned into “disposable bodies”; they are left outside the protection of international law and abandoned to the mercy of the sovereign.

The current situation at those camps and the conditions of displaced people raise important questions about the boundaries of pandemic borders and what (or who) defines them. It is not necessarily the virus, but those bodies marked as “immediate threats” to our healthy existence that reconfigure contemporary borders. As Wilcox discusses above, in the current climate, social distancing rules and closure of national borders protect and preserve the life of those who “become the object of political care” while excluding those “disposable bodies” from any protection. The politics of pandemic borders is a form of necropolitics, the ultimate expression of sovereign “power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003, 11, emphasis added). What defines the necropolitics of pandemic borders is not simply sovereign power, but “the economy of violence”—the powerful interplay between spectacular violence (outbursts of physical violence) and suspended violence (invisible forms of violence that grow deeply within every organ of the ruling power) (Azoulay and Ophir 2012). Suspended violence, argue Azoulay and Ophir, allows the ruling power to operate without law, discipline, or ideology, and to proceed without war or catastrophe. Suspended violence does not eradicate spectacular violence. In the context of pandemic borders, spectacular violence becomes more imminent and visible, as the sovereign decides “who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe 2003, 27, emphasis in original). As Wilcox argues, in the language of negative biopolitics, some need to die or to be abandoned “in order to strengthen the health of others.”

Borders are closing, but they are not changing, as many suggest. As Freyberg-Inan argues above, we tend to overuse words “new” and “unprecedented” and exaggerate the change. Borders are not changing; instead, their violence appears in different forms and is exposed on the same “disposable” bodies. In the context of the current crisis, borders both within and between states are turning into sites where economic, cultural, racial, and bodily differences are negotiated. Thus, pandemic borders make existing mobility injustices more visible and deeper. Refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable temporary migrants, whose basic right to move was restricted before the current crisis, are once again transformed into “abject subjects” of borders. As refugee bodies are increasingly seen too costly and as bodies spreading the virus, many countries justify these restrictive measures in the name of “public” health. Those “disposable bodies” who are excluded from the public can no longer seek asylum. Having no place to go, they are once again left at “non-places” that are neither inside nor outside of state territories. Once again, necropolitics is turning borders into death spaces for those excluded from the global mobility regime.
“Borders are vacillating,” wrote Balibar (1998) in his often-quoted piece *The Borders of Europe*, and are proliferating, multiplying, and migrating away from the territorial edges of the state. His famous words, “borders are everywhere,” influenced critical border studies and established the field’s focus on biopolitical borders (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009). The central focus of this scholarship is on how borders move simultaneously with the bodies they seek to control and manage. The biopolitical border extends its scope beyond control of the entry and exit points of a state to management of life at the local, national, regional, and global levels. It generates new disciplinary-biopolitical strategies and improves already existing traditional methods of control such as creation of quarantine zones and construction of border walls and fences. The biopolitical border, in short, intervenes in the population and takes life as its main object of intervention.

Much has been written on how biopolitical borders reinforce established binary categories such as illegal/legal, regular/irregular, and documented/undocumented. The creation of such binary categories, Turner (2007) argues, aims to create a smooth liberal mobility regime for trusted bodies and an immobility regime for undesirable migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. I take these arguments a step further and argue that, in the current context, pandemic borders are in fact biopolitical borders that are increasingly becoming “immunitary dispositif” for those who enjoyed all the privileges of the liberal mobility regime before COVID-19. For Esposito, borders and immigration controls are solid expressions of the immunization paradigm of the modern state and its biopolitical existence. The term “immunity” refers to the resistance of an organism to the harmful effects of pathogens. In political–juridical language, immunity denotes an attempt to protect the social body from the danger of communal interaction through the use of what it opposes (Esposito 2011, 7). For Esposito, national borders are constitutive elements of an immunity paradigm that presupposes, but also negates, community, a common life, an obligation of gift giving. Immunitas is a negative protection of the self. It implies the exemption or exception from an obligation to care for others: “the risk of contamination immediately liquidates contact, relationality, and being in common” (Esposito 2013, 59).

Esposito (2011, 140) suggests that within the framework of the immunization paradigm, “to become the object of political ‘care,’ life had to be separated off and closed up inside progressively de-socialized spaces that were meant to immunize it against anything arising from community.” Today what we are witnessing is familiar sites of borders, such as detention centers, ships, islands, and camps, operating as immunitary dispositif. These sites protect the existent immobility and future mobility of those “trusted bodies” from the risk of contamination by refugees, asylum seekers, or unwanted immigrants. Thus, it is not surprising to see many refugees still being kept in detention centers and camps on islands. We see here that biopolitics (politics of life) and necropolitics (politics of death) are not two different realms, but simply two sides of the same coin. As Kotef (2015, 54) argues in her critique of liberal governance of mobility, “movement of some limits, hides, even denies the existence of others [...] the movement of some is further maximized by this effacement of others and their need to move.”

*Toward “Common Immunity” and Unlearning IR*

We are living in a time of uncertainty and fear. It seems necropolitics will continue to be the defining force of border politics. But, as Esposito (2011, 165) asks, can we imagine a different form of immunity that could take us beyond the narcissistic defense of the self against others, a different form of politics that could transform the immunization paradigm of the modern state? His answer is “common immunity,”
Thinking Theoretically in Unsettled Times

which challenges the negative identity of the immunological self and its closure to difference. It is a call for affirmative ethics, celebration of life in difference. Common immunity, as he defines bluntly, redefines the relationship between politics and life in a way to include those excluded. It does not seek for sameness, a common identity that could be shared by all, but the community of those affected bodies who are left on the outside and alliances with those bodies.

At the beginning of this essay, I argued that borders are affective experiences. Seeing borders as affective experiences offers us an alternative interpretation that can challenge the contemporary violent configuration of border politics. By “affect” I do not mean emotions; rather I use “affect” in a Deleuzian–Spinozist sense to express the capacity of bodies to change. Affect signifies the transformational capacities of bodies in their encounters with one another. Affect is a relational process: “When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight” (Massumi 2015, 4). The body, whether collective or individual, could be affected in many different ways. Affective politics help us focus on, as Shinko discusses below, the concept of embodiment. Most importantly, affective politics offers us hope, as it indicates that the self-destructive reading of the immunity paradigm is not necessarily our only destiny; our collective bodies in their interaction with each other can transform negative biopolitics into common immunity.

This transformation starts with rethinking contemporary border politics that defends our narrowly defined exclusive social imaginaries in the context of the current crisis. As I argued elsewhere, seeing the border as an affective experience means understanding it as a “multiplicity of possibilities, as a ‘meshwork,’ rather than a closed system” (Ozguc 2020a, 2020b). Violent borders do not need to be our only choice. COVID-19 could act as a wake-up call that the necropolitics of contemporary borders is not working. It simply creates deathscapes for those excluded from the right to human security. And this brings me to my final point: we need to unlearn IR’s statist narratives and tell our students a different story of IR, a story that does not begin and end with the all-encompassing power of leviathan and its bodily boundaries that we have taken for granted for too long. What we usually forget to teach our students in IR is that borders are not simply sovereign spaces. Borders are lived spaces actualized by bodies on the move. That is why it is time to tell our students that borders are not natural constructs, and their violence can be transformed by realizing methods of “common immunity” for our common humanity.

The Global Pandemic: Coming to a Body Near You

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COVID-19 attacks the body, it has no underlying political ideology or securitizing mission, its sweep is merely biological. It is unblinking in the face of conceits about who is human, who is barbaric. It is impervious to the pain, suffering, and loss it leaves in its wake. It thrives on complexity and ambiguity. It has no regard for time or space or incantations to the preservation of “otherness” and alterity. We are all other to it and it stands in relationship to us as a deadly alterity, an absolute difference, an indifferent, invisible enemy that silently circulates.

This may actually be a paradigmatic post-structural moment, where we no longer merely imagine the failure of metanarratives, or acknowledge the failure of our
quest for certainty and ponder the anxieties of ambiguity. We are living it. And from where I sit, the academic/intellectual reliance on existing theories provides no safe haven, no respite, no intellectual hope, including even those more critical approaches that placed in doubt every aspect of accepted epistemology and ontology. However, Freyberg-Inan in this forum may be right, and I am exaggerating the uniqueness of this moment. But I cannot help feeling that all of our approaches seem somehow, not expansive enough, not sublime enough, to address the structural impediments and the collision of class, race, economic and health disparities and inequities, and climate-related threats.

We may look for assurances that we have come through previous bad times (Freyberg-Inan), we may identify the (re)emergence of a familiar concept like nationalism (Sterling-Folker), or reconfigure a concept like borders (Ozguc), or create a critique (Wilcox) that, although it highlights our worst impulses, offers an explanation. I echo Du Plessis (2018, 104–5) that “some times are worse, in certain ways, than others” but we need to disabuse ourselves of history’s march toward redemption without becoming paralyzed by despair. Is the global pandemic one of these times that is worse and in what ways might it be so? Walker (2018, 90) cautions that oftentimes what we are trying to explain “exceed[s] the available categories of understanding.” The challenge, however, is to “diagnose these forces in ways that do not singularize, homogenize, or reduce them to something that can be solved once and for all” (Walker et al. 2018, 88). Thus, in agreement with Walker (2018, 89), what limits us are “poorly framed questions and concepts that are highly reified and overstretched.” Perhaps our creative and imaginative capacities in this current moment of rupture might benefit from Lyotard’s (1984, 81, italics original) provocation: “the artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done.”

“What will have been done”?

Post-structural approaches offered a more critical engagement with the politics of IR and were borne out of a sense of crisis in the study and practice of IR (Ashley and Walker 1990). Der Derian and Shapiro (1989, x) described the context as one of rupture “where foundational unities (the autonomous subject, the sovereign state, grand theory) and synthetic oppositions (subject–object, self–other, inside–outside) are undergoing serious and sustained challenges and where textuality has emerged to displace objective reality.” They rejected overarching metanarratives and declined to grant science, technology, or reason pride of place. Universal moral codes were replaced with a deterritorialized ethics and “self-making in a register of freedom” (Ashley and Walker 1990). Nonetheless, these scholarly lines of critique by Shapiro, Connolly, Klein, Campbell, Weber, and George, among others, intentionally attempted to provoke consternation and draw attention to a broader remit of issues, problems, and approaches than the heart of the discipline was willing to recognize or admit. The language was itself disruptive and at times confounding in its syntax and alignment of words and phrases as it deliberately attempted to create a language of critique that could at once reject the binaries of liberalism and realism while provoking something new in its midst. Admittedly, many were totally dismissive of the idea that there even was a crisis. Then, as now, the challenge remains how to “talk about these present formations without lapsing into nostalgia, blind panic, or unhelpful predictions” (Walker et al. 2018, 88). In short, to refute theory.

When going to the grocery store, either out of a necessity to work in order to survive or to eat in order to survive, becomes an existential dilemma, one might be inclined to be a bit cynical about deconstructions and critiques that are reluctant to identify some sense of direction or what comes next. One might also wonder about how to productively engage ambiguity, complexity, and multiplicity in light
of the rejection of all the theories designed to create some semblance of order in the midst of chaos. Even postcolonial scholars (Ansems de Vries et al. 2017, 90) have been critical of post-structural approaches precisely because “active ontological (re-)construction is an important task for critical thought and ... [what is needed is] ... more ontological investment and deliberation than particularly post-structuralist critique admits.”

The global pandemic, the indiscriminate, sanctioned murder of Black and Brown women and men, and the severe financial distress and economic hardships have created the perfect storm exacerbating the impacts of ineffectual policies, societal divisions, and disparate national and international responses, all challenging exactly what, if any, intellectual purchase the term “modern” has anymore. COVID-19 has exacerbated long-standing issues with respect to widening income gaps, disparities in access to health care, technological divides, environmental challenges, and threats posed by the emergence of new strains of highly infectious disease. COVID-19 has certainly sparked a sense of isolation, disorientation, and fear among many around the world. And the current political terrain is fraught because we understand what happens when discourse freely floats disconnected from embodied lived realities that not only cannot be agreed upon, but are ignored or dismissed as fake. Our present moment is contentious, ambiguous, complicated, and complex and invariably reflects irreconcilable, intractable, multiple, intersecting, and overlapping sets of political commitments.

“what will have been done”?

Ansems de Vries et al. (2017, 90) expresses a concern about “the way that much critical/post-structuralist thought tends to tacitly reproduce modern, liberal ontologies”; thus, she advocates charting a course “through the middle.” I want to pause here and consider what it might mean in our present context where a global pandemic further complicates our efforts to grapple with the entwined challenges shaped by current iterations of modern/colonial frames of understanding. I cannot help but feel that the suggestion of “taking things through the middle” is untenable because of the inherent contradictions resting at its core. The creation/designation/establishment of a middle is a performative political act, one that would require the identification of what constitutes the middle and what substantiates it as such. But does the desire to create a middle even make sense anymore; how would we even know whether we were in the middle or not just off on some intellectual tangent that we call the middle? To my mind it only makes sense if the categories according to which we locate our relative positions, as being in the middle, are somewhat stable and separable.

Alternately, for V’azquez (Ansems de Vries et al. 2017, 92), another participant in the same collective discussion, “the challenge is therefore one of overcoming the modern/colonial framework, not merely disrupting or fracturing it.” The concept of modernity was drawn in relief against its colonial other who was “set outside the political, as uncivilized, savage, or pure nature” (Ansems de Vries et al. 2017, 92). The conceptual frame must be smashed because it cannot recognize, it cannot “see,” it cannot admit the humanity of the colonial other. I am likewise wary of narratives of emancipation that promise the light on the other side of this present darkness, only to find ourselves covered in shards of glass. This modern/colonial binary framework troubles me, as it is not so neatly separable nor is either side reflective of the degree of internal coherence and unity that seems to be required in order to structure the paring and proffer its resistance, whether through the creation of a middle pathway or its destruction. The cautionary tale I want to draw from this criticism of post-structuralism and the suggested ontological (re)constructions has implications for our efforts to understand the current pandemic. The conceptual categories we bring to this moment inevitably frame not only our interpretations but the range of possible responses. I wonder whether framing the current
pandemic as one global event or singular entity may be inherently flawed and that there are multiple pandemics experienced and lived in contradictory and incommensurate ways. I further wonder whether the concept of modernity is not one of those overexhusted abstractions or metaphorical shortcuts that has outlasted its relevance.

COVID-19 has drawn attention to the material or physical body, but we also acknowledge the lived, the felt, the sensed, the affective body captured in the concept of embodiment. Embodiment acknowledges the felt body; how the body communicates within political, social, and economic fields; how bodies are materialized; how they are "lived through narratives"; and their enactments and capacity for affectivity (Blackmun 2008, 10–13; Shinko 2012). The concept of embodiment might offer some insights as a first cut at understanding the challenges we face, but I am chastened by Walker’s (2018, 89) admonition to be wary of “concepts that are highly reified and overstretched.” Embodiment speaks to our embeddedness in a material world that affects us and we it. It acknowledges our physical bodies, our inter-relationality with one another, and our material conditions and surroundings. One of the key components of embodiment is affectivity, which is reflective of physical sensations between bodies and their implications for how we envision and enact our ethical relationships.

Shapiro (1999, 80) elaborated on the ethics of encounter with alterity and that we “must of necessity be ready to be afflicted by the performance of the other.” The ethics of encounter underscores how bodies enable and enact affliction. Ozguc above describes how borders are affectively experienced and her support for an affective politics calls us to be afflicted by the “abject subjects” of borders. Butler (2004, 20) developed the concept of precarity, which rests on the ontological acknowledgment “of the social vulnerability of our bodies” and that this corporeal vulnerability is a part of bodily life. Butler (2004, xviii, 29) recognizes that “dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended.” Ansems de Vries et al. (2017, 95) concur, “Visibility is not just a visual matter of appearance and recognition but also a question of knowledge production, that is, of producing and/or disrupting a particular sense of reality.” This is especially significant given the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19’s toll within African American, Hispanic, and Native American communities in the United States.

COVID-19 has exposed how our bodily proximity, our physical interactions within our families, in our communities, and across the world, poses a threat to our survival. And when this is layered over long-standing racial and ethnic prejudice, the ground, for at worst inflamed hatred and violence, and at best indifference, has been laid. Partly due to our own design, including the adoption of mitigation measures, such as mask wearing and social distancing, in combination with the circulation and mutations of COVID-19, our precarity is not evenly distributed. Perhaps one could argue that it is in the abstract, but not in the interstices of our embodied, daily lives as Wilcox and Ozguc so aptly demonstrate.

How do we understand the different human tragedies and represent the suffering and loss for which there is no one-size-fits-all explanation? It behooves us to care about and pay attention to the afflictions in the daily lived experiences of those in densely packed refugee encampments, in elderly care facilities, in zones of conflict, in multigenerational households, in various communities, and in areas additionally impacted by natural disasters, all of which might attest to the reason why the current time is somehow worse. These are the threads that can be pulled together to narrate complex and contradictory stories attentive to not only class, race, and gender, but also the overarching structural disparities, embedded inequities, and their operative relations of power.

“What will have been done” is a challenge to think about how we can draw upon our creativity and imagination in order to make our way through the uncertainty of this present moment.
Post-structuralism questioned the pride of place accorded to science, writ large as a system of knowledge creation, and argued for its repositioning as one of many competing forms of knowledge, fraught with the same cultural biases and vagaries that accompany any human endeavor. We need to be attentive to why COVID-19 infects some bodies and not others and why some are more exposed than others across a spectrum of unequally distributed precarities. It has been interesting to watch the production of scientific knowledge as it wades through ambiguity, guessing, and error, in short, the messy, socially constructed work of questioning, revising, and learning. This is not an admission that science is the model for organizing all of our other ways of thinking and understanding, nor is it a recommendation to smash it. Science sits alongside frames of politics and economics, as well as in social and cultural contexts, national and international. The creation of knowledge and its application is partial and proceeds from multiple vantage points across all of our respective fields of study. It matters whether or not we are attentive to the particularities of our embodied experiences where the domestic intersects the international and the political, social, and economic all intertwine. Considering our embodied experiences is one way to place the advantages of privilege and the effects of racism, sexism, and class (discrimination and marginalization) at the center of our critical endeavors. It is not a question of merely recognizing the multiplicity and diversity inherent in our embodiment (our thinking and being) but valuing it and reflecting on the limits of our own conceptual frameworks and what it would mean to approach this moment in the absence of rules.

“What will have been done” is ...

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