COVID Masks as Semiotic Expressions of Hate

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Abstract
In April 2021, as COVID briefly appeared to recede in the United States, Fox News host Tucker Carlson went on a lengthy rant against mask wearers. It appeared as if, to paraphrase Hegel, the owl of Minerva was flying at dusk. Why complain about masks at the very time mask mandates were being rolled back and society was—or so it seemed—returning to normal? The answer must lie in the mask itself, and what it represents. In anti-masking discourse, the mask has had two symbolic meanings—mask wearers as sheep, and the masks as burqas. Sheep are obedient, while burqas are instruments of social control. At a deeper level, the very act of mask wearing becomes seen as oppressive, while revealing one’s face is freedom itself. This view of masking (and revealing one’s face) is not new, rather it dates back in Europe to a “revolutionary transparency” that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution that has been appropriated by anti-maskers. While the sheep and burqa images have some play in anti-masking discourse, the connection between freedom and showing one’s face is the most durable message anti-maskers see conveyed by the COVID face mask.

Keywords Masks · Anti-Masking · Sheep · Burqas · COVID-19 · Social Control · French Revolution · Freedom

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1 Introduction

On April 27, 2021, approximately one month after COVID vaccines became readily available in the United States, Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson\(^1\) devoted his nightly monologue to mask wearing [1]. Some of the points Carlson made in his monologue about masking were comparatively uncontroversial [1]. The medical establishment had wrongly suggested that masks had to be worn whenever one was outside. The practice of requiring anyone two or older to wear a mask was excessive—especially given the World Health Organization’s suggestion that even children aged 5–11 did not need to wear a mask [1]. But Carlson went further. In addition to suggesting that mask wearing was unnecessary, he argued that the ordinary folk scorned by the mask wearers should turn the tables. When an ordinary (unmasked) person sees a mask wearer, they should scold them. When they see a child with a mask, they should call child protective services [1].

Carlson’s commentary raises a question. What is it about the medical anti-COVID mask that aroused hatred—especially at a time when it appeared that mask mandates would slowly wither away? On one level Carlson was surely trolling “the libs”. At the same time, however, the focus on the mask as an object of hate is present in other branches of anti-masker thought, in which mask wearers are viewed as “sheep” [4] and masks derided as “COVID-burqas” [5]. What is it about these images—sheep and burqas—that resonated with anti-maskers? As we shall see, a key element in the sheep and burqa imagery is a fixation on social control. On the one hand, sheep are marked as “obedient,” while the burqa is associated with a religion connected with social control and submission while also being marked as a device that accomplishes this goal.

The connection between masking and social control runs deep. Maskers have surrendered themselves to the state. They have become part of the herd. As such, they are no longer persons; instead, they are possessed by the state. The goal of anti-maskers, then, is to snap the mask wearers out of their trance by having them reveal their face. In taking this step, the anti-maskers invoke a tradition dating back to the French Revolution that views the showing one’s face as an act of “revolutionary transparency” [6, p. 95]. This reflects broader anxieties about the growth of state power during the pandemic, while helping to show why revealing one’s face has played such a central role in debates over the permissibility of wearing a burqa in public.

This essay first offers some context on mask wearing and the opposition to it from semiotic and historical perspectives. In particular, it focuses on three historical precedents: (1) the French Revolution [6], (2) the mid-1920s opposition to Ku Klux Klan masks with its focus on the role secrecy plays in undermining democratic discourse [7, pp. 99–101, 4] and (3) the European debate over the burqa [8].

\(^1\) As the moderator of the most watched cable news program in the United States, and one of the leading advocates of Trumpism in the United States [2], Carlson is an influential figure in American politics; indeed, for a while he was seen as a potential candidate for president in 2024 [2]. As a result, Carlson’s words about masking did not merely resonate in right-wing circles, they also shaped the broader political discourse over COVID in the United States, as Americans of all political stripes reacted Carlson’s comments [3].
The next two sections focus on the content associated with masks. With maskers as sheep, the question quickly emerges as to why anti-maskers, who in the United States often come from a Christian perspective, have chosen to demonize their foes by comparing them to a biblical animal.

The COVID burqa raises additional questions. Why, for instance, did a college student in Idaho complain that a mask mandate forced her to wear a “freaking” burqa [10, p. 699]? If the burqa is more comfortable (because it is less tight fitting) why is it worse than a mask? Also, given the paucity of burqa wearers, more generally, why was the COVID-burqa a popular way to characterize the mask?

Next, the article takes up, from a semiotic perspective, how anti-maskers view the act of masking itself. On the one hand, masking is a form of sanitation theater meant to show one is serious about COVID [11, p. 52]. On the other hand, anti-masking builds on a romantic ideal of showing one’s face that dates back to the French Revolution [6]. The section explores how anti-maskers have used these ideas to equate freedom with showing one’s human face.

The Conclusion examines the three major framings of the COVID mask—maskers as sheep, the COVID burqa and masking as an unfree act—from the perspective of the semiotics of hate. Which framing is the most exclusionary? Which is the most dangerous? How do the different framings deal with the medical necessity of at least some masking, and the fundamental human freedom to decide whether to mask?

2 Masks, Anti-Masking and Semiotics

The rise of anti-COVID masks, and rejection of masks has given rise to explorations of the meaning of masking and unmasking grounded in anthropology, sociology and semiotics. The dominant explanation—at least in the United States—traces the masking question to the divide between conservative “red” states and liberal ‘blue” states [12]. Assisted by then President Trump’s lengthy reluctance to wear a mask, which he saw as “weak,” masking became a marker of a larger symbolic struggle over Trumpism, the seriousness of COVID and competing views of the state. In a sense, the COVID mask became the alter ego of the red Make America Great Again (MAGA) cap. Wearing (or not wearing) a mask let others know where one stood.

The red vs. blue explanation for mask wearing owes a great deal to the visible, personal and changeable nature of the mask [12]. At the same time, it has its limitations. For one thing, it ignores many ordinary citizens who viewed the mask not as a political symbol, but as a tool for fighting COVID [13]. The red vs. blue framing also ignores other possible framings of mask wearing—one might, for instance, argue that only the privileged have the choice to mask or not mask [14, 15]. Finally, the red vs. blue explanation tells us who wears a mask but does not identify what, specifically, masking—or showing one’s face—represents.

To put it another way, when someone is attacked for wearing a mask, what are they called? Are they a liberal dupe? A sheep? A burqa wearer? An agent of oppressive state control? These are the questions this essay seeks to explore. During the height of the red vs. blue divide in May and June of 2020, there was an answer: The mask
wearer was (implicitly) a supporter of mask mandates. What about April 2021 when, to all appearances, we had entered an era of anti-masking without mandates?

Here the discipline of semiotics can be helpful. Long before the arrival of COVID-19 humans wore masks, which in turn carried different symbolic meanings [16]. Masks have historically been associated with power relations [17], ritual possession [18], the formation of secret societies [19, p. 26] and situations of social reversal such as carnival [6, pp. 89–91]. In these instances, the power of the mask can come from ownership of it, what the mask symbolizes, or what the mask covers.\(^2\) The messages conveyed by the COVID-19 surgical mask, in turn, reflect this diversity. For instance, a COVID mask could send the message “stay away” [15, p. 255] or be a sign of what Leone refers to as the “traumatic medicalization” of the face [16, p. 56]. Alternatively, the mask could simply convey one’s status as sick or contagious, which—as Leone points out—helps explain our aversion to masks [16, p. 57].

That said, the conversion of the COVID mask into an object of hate relies on a more specific set of meanings, one’s based on the connection between masking and social control. These meanings, in turn, rely on three critical historical moments. The first moment is the road to Thermidor when, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, masks were first banned in an effort to prevent the rowdiness of carnival, then derided as a form of aristocratic disguise, until ultimately in the months when the Terror was at its height, the mask became attached to the person—who supported the Revolution, but did so in an inauthentic way [6, pp. 91–94, 96–99, 105–06]. The association of masking with aristocratic disguise, in addition to leading to a rule about hat wearing and proposed national uniforms [6, pp. 108–09], cast the unmasked face as a symbol of revolutionary egalitarianism. As Johnson puts it: “In a world of equals, united in fraternal love, sincerity replaces clever banter; ardor replaces the mask.” [6, p. 92]. Thus began Europe’s love affair with the human face.

The second moment came in the 1920s. While mask wearing secret societies date back to ancient Cyprus [19, p. 26], and the original purpose of bans on Ku Klux Klan mask wearing was the practical one of stopping Klan night riding and acts of terror in the 1870s [7, pp. 97–99], in the 1920s—the heyday of the second, populist Klan—the arguments for and against masking turned on secrecy, which reflected the way the Klan members had infiltrated the major institutions of society including both political parties, local government, law enforcement and the other key social groups [7, pp. 99–101; 21]. The Klan infiltration, in turn, deepened the connection between mask wearing, secrecy, and a type of cowardice that went against democratic norms. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, the “people see in the Ku Klux Klan a way of doing and saying that which they themselves are ashamed to do and say” [8, p. 302]. The mask enabled this cowardly secrecy, and became associated with it.

The final moment came with the burqa bans that have swept through Europe over the past two decades [10, 22]. As late as 2005, face veil bans were rare in Europe. In the years that followed, first Belgium, then France, and finally a cascade of European countries adopted laws making it illegal to cover one’s face [10, pp. 675–77]. If the burqa was the intended target of these bans, the language used to justify them—espe-

\(^2\) For instance, while European masking is associated with eyes, in other societies the focus of identity rests on hearing and, masking involves disguising one’s voice [20, p. 590].
cally by the European Court of Human Rights in *S.A.S. v. France* [23]—did not focus on Muslims, or radical Islam. Instead, it returned to the ideals of the French Revolutionary era to proclaim that showing one’s face is essential to the modern, egalitarian project of living together [23]. One may view the “living together” rationale as a fig-leaf for other objections to the burqa more rooted in questions of Islam and gender [9, 24], a view reinforced by the French debate over the burkini, which does not involve face coverings [25].

At the same time, however, the face veil bans have not been enforced solely against burqa wearers. In Austria, for example, authorities enforced the 2017 mask ban against commercial hawkers dressed in animal costumes, a cyclist wearing a scarf because of the cold weather, and a leukemia patient [10, pp. 679–80]. This broad enforcement shows how the face veil bans, whatever their original intent, deepened the contrast between inauthentic mask wearing and the virtuous nature of showing one’s face. One sees this also in Leone’s description of his 2016 sabbatical in Kyoto Japan, in which he expressed how he felt it “strange, or even uncomfortable” to have conversations with his Japanese counterparts who were “wearing masks concealing their noses, mouths, lips, smiles, and labials” [16, p. 48] He added that protective masks (presumably the same COVID style surgical masks we wear today) “would not bother people in Japan because it was not as important there as in Europe to look at someone’s eyes” [16, p. 49].

This leads to a final introductory point. While Leone is surely correct that European attitudes towards the mask are culturally specific, his explanation of why he felt uncomfortable with Japanese masking—especially the comment about looking at someone in the eyes—relies on a functionalism about the human face and what the mask does. Yes, the mask prevents seeing whether someone is smiling or frowning. That Leone went further than this and mentioned eye contact—even though the typical COVID mask does not cover the eyes—shows the extent to which seeing the human face has become a package deal: “If I cannot see your nose and mouth, it doesn’t matter that I can still see your eyes.” This emphasis on the mask’s power to impede human discourse, in turn, finds expression in the imagery anti-maskers use to reject the COVID mask.

### 3 The Semiotics of Anti-Masking

So what do anti-maskers think of COVID masks and the people who wear them? One might start with the message the mask wearers themselves are communicating. Describing mask wearing in Japan, Leone relates how “protective masks” are worn in part to “signify” the identity of “the well-behaved citizen who does not want to contaminate others” [16, p. 50]. This statement gets at a common motivation for wearing a COVID mask, as well as the sense, among mask wearers, that the mask is not a symbol but rather a tool to fight a dangerous disease [13]. It also explains Tucker Carlson’s view that the mask is “purely a sign of political obedience” [1].

Carlson’s major move in his anti-mask discourse is clever. He seeks to turn the tables on snobby, elite mask wearing communitarians:
[Y]ou see them everywhere when you walk down the street of any major city. Dare to go on foot from Union Station to the Capitol, for example, in Washington without a mask, and angry Biden voters will snort at you in judgment. “How could you?” they’re saying from behind the gauze. “How could you?” That’s what we should be asking of them. The rest of us should be snorting at them first. They’re the aggressors. It’s our job to brush them back and restore the society we were born in [1].

To remedy this, Carlson asks his readers “the next time” they see someone wearing a mask “on the sidewalk or the bike path” to say the following: “[W]ould you please take off your mask? Science shows there is no reason to wear it. Your mask is making me uncomfortable”[1].

Carlson’s approach to masks is somewhat scattershot—he equates masks with “Kim Il Sung pins in Pyongyang” and, at one point, calls for burning piles of surgical masks—just as others have burned American flags [1]. But the ultimate source of Carlson’s discomfort is the obedience of the maskers. What does “obedience” look like? This next section will focus on two images of the mask that give expression to Carlson’s vague sense of discomfort—mask wearers as sheep, and the mask as COVID burqa.

### 3.1 Mask Wearers as Sheep

To explore the power of the sheep metaphor to portray masks and maskers in a negative light, let’s move from Tucker Carlson to Robert Snaza, a local sheriff in Washington State. In June 2020, Snaza—wearing his police uniform, but no mask—told a crowd gathered outside a church: “Don’t be a sheep” [5]. He was protesting Washington State’s decision to impose a mask mandate. As such, he was one of several “constitutionalist sheriffs” who resisted mask mandates and stay at home orders. As Snaza spoke, a billboard above him read: “Oh, no! A virus. Quick—burn the bill of rights.” [5].

While the billboard highlights the diverse arguments used to oppose masking and lockdown orders, the “sheep” metaphor garnered the most attention. Washington State Governor Jay Inslee objected to mask wearers being compared to “barnyard animals” [3]. Sheriff Snaza defended himself, explaining: “Just because I said ‘don’t be a sheep’ does not mean I’m outwardly saying I want you to violate orders” [5]. Nor was this an isolated example. For instance, a letter writer to the Baltimore Sun in May 2021 complained about how—despite mask fatigue—masks were being warn “in numbers far greater than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say are necessary” before concluding: “We have become a nation of sheep” [26].

The popularity of the sheep metaphor has carried over to merchandizing. One can buy masks with sheep images on them, as well as masks with messages accompanying the sheep such as: “A nation of sheep will beget a government of wolves.”

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3 These masks are available at Chief T-Shirt. See https://www.chieftshirt.com/product/nation-of-sheep-cloth-face-mask/?gclid=CjwKCAjwn8SLBhAyEiwAHNTJbekQJ9mWuZiU2sgY Ez3VDzzcQQVliFqc2pNgisaU9LHsCy_qp3a74xoC7gQA vD_BwE.
Or masks containing images of sheep that bleat “obey.” On Amazon one can buy a decal for your mask that reads: “Good Little Sheep Wear Their Masks”—leading the observer to wonder whether the wearer is seeking praise for being a “good little sheep” or if the sentiments on the decal were intended as a criticism of other mask wearers. Finally, for the masker who wants to judge sheep mask wearers without casting themselves as an ovine animal, one can purchase “lions not sheep” masks and t-shirts. Some of the t-shirts replace the image of the sheep with a skeleton Statue of Liberty wearing a red, white and blue mask.

On one level, the use of sheep metaphor to target masks and masking makes sense. Sheep have something of a mixed reputation. As Philip Carnes, the author of a master’s thesis on the shepherd metaphor and biblical leadership (and the owner of a herd of goats and sheep) points out, sheep are seen as “dirty, smelly, (reputedly) stupid animals unable to care for themselves and prone from wandering into the most awful situations, from which they cannot extricate themselves” [27, p. 2]. Then there is the connection—made explicit in the comments of Sheriff Snaza and the sheep clothing items—between sheep and obedience. The sheep follow the herd, which makes them easily fleeced [27, p. 3] and, as one of the masks declares, makes them easy picking for the wolves [28, p. 77].

The sheep’s characteristics of obedience, stupidity and aimless wandering fit into anti-masker discourse about mask wearing. While Tucker Carlson does not use the word sheep in his article, the themes he raises fit into the sheep metaphor. When he says that his readers “acquiesced to the power grab” and “let it happen” [1], he is, in essence, accusing them of being obedient sheep. This is the type of sheep who for the good of the herd—an interesting play on the communitarian logic of mask wearing—blindly followed the advice of public health officials who insisted that masks must always be worn outdoors, rather than following “the science”[1].

Or consider Brian Stanley who posted on the blog Must Read Alaska about being fired for refusing to get vaccinated [29]. After criticizing his doctor for failing to understand that masks are “an obedience charade” and asking why pants don’t stop farts, he closed his post with the question: “I wonder how long it will take until we achieve herd intelligence” [29]. The closing plays on the idea of “herd immunity” but it also reinforces the idea that sheep—and maskers—are stupid. This reflects the conclusion of Carnes, who notes: “Sheep have become a metaphor for a group of people will blindly follow anyone” [27, p. 2]. For opponents of lockdowns, masks, and vaccines, maskers are the most visible sign of the social control brought about by the pandemic. This makes sheep, and the herd, apt metaphors.

And yet the connection between masks, obedience, and sheep has some problems. The biggest one concerns religion. While mask wearers—and anti-maskers—come in all religious denominations, there are opponents of masking who base their arguments on Christianity [30, 31]. For example, one might reject the mask as a sign of “oppression” sent by Satan to cover up the fact that we are made in the image of God

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4 For instance, an “obey” mask was available at Red Bubble. See https://www.redbubble.com/i/mask/Obey-Sheep-by-SteveGrime/48658694.9G0D8.
5 See https://www.amazon.com/Little-diecut-Coronavirus-Covid-19-Covid19/dp/B08CBF4DCP.
6 These items are available at Lionsnotsheep.com.
At the same time, however, God is pictured as a shepherd in the Bible, as is Jesus [27, p. 2]. Indeed, there are theological arguments about why it is preferable to be a sheep rather than a goat [32].

Given all of this, why choose to castigate one’s opponents by referring to them with the name of a biblical animal? Here Carnes provides some insight. His master’s thesis calls for returning “shepherding” to the center of pastoral practices, as opposed to modern trends where the pastor is seen as a leader, CEO or entrepreneur [27, p. 3]. In this call, Carnes rejects modern practices that focus on gaining new converts (“lost sheep”) at the expense of keeping the herd healthy [27, p. 3]. This leads Carnes to quote C.S. Lewis who said: “I wish they’d remember that the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats, or even, Teach my performing dogs new tricks” [27, p. 18; 33, p. 5].

The call to “Feed my sheep” is a fundamentally communitarian one. It requires relational modes of leadership in which fellow sheep themselves may become shepherds to help guide the flock [27, p. 43]. These guides know the needs of the flock and restore its members to health [27, p. 43]. It is they—the sheep—who are in control, rather than a swashbuckling “Pastropreneur” [27, p. 18] who relies on sports and business metaphors that prize individual initiative at the expense of the church as a whole [27, pp. 16–18, 44].

For a certain type of anti-masker of a libertarian stripe, someone who might imagine themselves as a CEO, entrepreneur or sports hero, the fundamentally small “c” conservative nature of the herd and shepherding is profoundly threatening—especially since it suggests that one of the tasks of the sheep is to oversee (i.e. police) the flock. To switch animals, these are the “angry Biden voters” who, according to Tucker Carlson, “snort in judgment” at anti-maskers [1].

The shepherd metaphor is all the more threatening because, in the world of the pandemic, perfect safety is an impossibility [11, p. 100]. Instead, as Kari Nixon an expert on the representation of pandemics in Victorian literature notes, societies struggle to balance the gains of preventive measures such as lockdowns, vaccines and masking against the reality that we need economy to function—even during a pandemic [11, p. 32–35]. Mask wearing has become a symbol of a certain way of making these balances. These decisions are made by the herd, rather than by from Tucker Carlson’s “free society” of “individuals” who reveal their faces to engage in “intimacy and human contact” [1].

There are, however, two additional options for anti-maskers who want to square the sheep metaphor with the biblical role of sheep. First, while the bible is full of sheep—in both the Old and New Testaments—the sheep do not always fare that well. As Romanian Orthodox theologian Ilie Melniciuc Puică points out, the stories of Cain and Abel, and Abraham and Isaac involve sacrificing a sheep [34, pp. 78–82]. Isaiah 53.7 describes how God’s servant would shed blood “as patiently as a sacrificial lamb or sheep” [34, p. 83]. The language from Isaiah 53.7 is also interesting for our purposes. It describes how the servant will suffer “like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” [34, p. 83].

Like the Lamb of God, the anti-COVID mask wearer covers their mouth, and as such, stays silent as the sacrifice slowly takes place. This sense of powerlessness
reflects Tucker Carlson’s complaint that “we”—anti-maskers, or the American people—“kept playing along” once it was clear that the mask wearers were not “serious” about the science behind masking.\(^7\) As a result, continues Carlson, “a lot of people got hurt, and many of those were children”—who were forced to wear masks [1]. In this use of the sheep metaphor, the sheep are not the enemy. Rather they are victims, like the Lamb of God, who have suffered silently.

Second, in the Book of Revelation the role of sheep undergoes a change. The Lamb of God, first used in the context of Passover and later seen as representing Jesus [34, pp. 84–88] takes on a new image according to which the Lamb of God, rather than being seen as sacrifice, is viewed “in terms of martyrdom or death in battle” [34, p. 89]. This reflects the use of the term Lion of Judah from the old testament to refer to the resurrected Christ set out in Revelation 5:5.6 [34, p. 89], and is visually portrayed by images of a sheep standing on a mystical mountain attended to by evangelists [34, p. 94]. The result is a blurring of symbols where the Resurrected Christ takes on the characteristics of a lion and a lamb [34, p. 94].

The changing nature of the Lamb of God helps to explain the “lions, not sheep” line of clothing, which seeks to replace the sacrificial lamb of the Isaiah with the powerful Lion of Judah who—instead of submitting meekly—acts from a place of power. One sees a similar transformation at the end of Tucker Carlson’s piece where he calls on his readers to “snort back” at the mask enforcers and “restore the society we were born in” [1].

As the “lions, not sheep” concept shows, the depiction of mask wearers as sheep—while prevalent—is somewhat limited in its ability to convey hatred. In a society nurtured in religious stories about sheep and grazing, mask wearing sheep are still part of “us.” The hope is that they sheep will reject their masks, and become more like the Lion of Judah. Moreover, the bible stories about sheep open the door for rebuttals, like the one written by one reader who drawing on Matthew 25:31–46 where the sheep were separated from the goats—who failed to take care of the most vulnerable. Explaining that face coverings protect others, “including the vulnerable,” the writer asks whether it would be “better” to be a sheep [35]. This also highlights the inclusive, malleable possibilities inherent in the sheep mask image. As we shall see, the other image used to depict the mask in the United States—the burqa—lacks this quality.

### 3.2 Masks as COVID-Burqas

Unlike the sheep mask, the COVID burqa is based on otherness. The image highlights both the alien nature of the surgical mask for most people, as well as associating mask wearing with Islam, which is cast as an alien social force. In taking this

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\(^7\) According to Carlson this lack of seriousness was shown by the way public health authorities supported the protests following the murder of George Floyd even though some protesters did not wear masks [1]. It seemed as if masking was being enforced in a political way. In reality, the response of the public health experts was uneven (some expressed support for demonstrating while masked), the protests were largely outdoors and COVID rates were in decline in June 2020 [12, p. 23]. This made the public health response to protests look more like an understandable compromise during an unforeseen situation rather than proof that masking was never meant to be taken seriously.
step, the COVID burqa proponents have built on a pre-existing discourse (primarily in Europe) that views the burqa as an existential, societal threat. As a result, far more than the sheep mask, the COVID burqa has the potential to spread hate.

While there are predecessors, the idea that the mask is a form of burqa was popularized by Sebastian Gorka, a former official in the Trump Administration who, in June 2020 while appearing as a guest on a radio talk show, responded to a caller who had complained of “Democrat Islamo-Maoist masks” by asking: “You mean the COVID burqas, the COVID masks” [5]? Elaborating, Gorka explained—in terms echoing the European burqa debates—that masks not only “dehumanize the individual” in interactions “with other human beings” but are also “an act of submission” [5].

The COVID burqa concept formed part of a larger project to project the pandemic as a whole onto Muslims. For example, in May 2020, a month before Gorka’s remarks, a Facebook user made a meme about how lockdown rules—which closed bars, prevented sporting events, and forced farmers to slaughter hogs—was part of a plot to make the “entire world” Muslim [36]. Unlike the sheep, who are part of “us”, even if they have lost their way, the burqa wearers are outsiders who are seeking to force us to submit.

These ideas are reflected in Tucker Carlson’s plea against mask wearing. After describing maskers as “hyper-aggressive zealots,” Carlson casts the maskers as outsiders: “These people making these demands don’t own America. They didn’t build America, They didn’t build anything—they can’t” [1]. Instead, they have turned “Brooklyn and San Francisco into uninhabitable indoctrination camps,” which Carlson traces to their “evangelical faith.” At the same time, however, Carlson does not explicitly mention Islam or burqas—although he does call masks “signifiers of shame and submission” [1]. So, Carlson, in an otherwise very broad ranging attack on masking, stops short of invoking the COVID burqa, at least explicitly. Instead, in the part of the article where he discusses submission, Carlson instead argues that only “Klansmen and armed robbers” wear masks [1].

This poses an interesting moment for understanding the connection between masks and hate. To the extent Carlson wants to convert his audience—convince them to take off the mask, or stand up to the maskers—it is easier to use the Klan as a reference point. Perhaps, this is because the during the 1940 and 1950s, as elites in southern states such as Georgia, and South Carolina sought to preserve segregation, they trumpeted their modern sensibilities on questions of race by passing anti-mask laws that symbolically repudiated the Klan [7, pp. 101–04]. Later, conservatives sought to extend this message by seeking bans on left-wing (Antifa) mask wearing [7, pp. 137–40]. This served to demonize the environmental activists (and others) who were seen as comprising Antifa, while normalizing the troubled history of racism, segregation and the Klan by suggesting that “the Left” had its own version of the Klan [7, pp. 137–38]. In this framing, the Klan reference demonizes the mask and, in a way similar to the European face veil debate, conveys the message that a proper citizen shows their face.

For instance, on June 20, 2020, four days before the story about Gorka ran in the Huffington Post, a meme was posted on Twitter showing a standard surgical mask slowing changing into a burqa [36].
The COVID burqa concept, by contrast, goes further along the path toward hate than Carlson is willing to go. The COVID burqa is not simply a symbol of oppressed women, who should be free to remove their chains, it is the costume of the oppressor as well. One sees this in the account of the Idaho woman, described in the Introduction, who is outraged at the indignity of having to wear a burqa which, while presumably more comfortable, is the symbol of an alien religion [10, p. 699]. (In addition to complaining about having the wear the “freaking burqa,” the woman complains about having to “dress like a Muslim”) [10, p. 699]. It is one thing to wear an uncomfortable surgical mask that makes it hard to communicate with others; it is far worse to wear a symbol of an outsider group. If masks are bad, burqas are worse.

This has been the experience of burqa wearers in societies in Europe and Quebec where masks are required but burqas are banned [37, 38]. Unlike several U.S. states that repealed or suspended their mask bans once COVID mask mandates came into force [10, pp. 673–74], in Europe the face veil bans have stayed in place, creating a sense of unequal treatment. Yet the arguments raised by opponents of the face veil bans play into the hands of those like Sebastian Gorka. For instance, Katherine Bullcock, arguing against the Quebec face veil ban asked:

The calling of the sacred motivates some to wear the niqab. A highly infectious disease propels many to wear face masks. If we all start wearing masks does it mean we have succumbed to a form of oppression? Are we submissive? [38]

Those who believe a surgical mask meant to fight a deadly pandemic is in fact a COVID burqa would answer “yes” on both counts. This reinforces May 2020 meme in which the pandemic is being used by nefarious powers to turn “us” into Muslims.

At the same time, the COVID burqa has an advantage over one other framing of the mask—namely the invocation of the mask as a symbol of Nazism. Statements comparing mask mandates to Nazi-era policies directed against Jews are subject to fast rebukes. This is true even of right-wing Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene who, days after comparing mask mandates with the requirement that Jews wear a yellow star, made public apology complete with a visit to the Holocaust Museum [39].

By contrast, the COVID burqa feels less out of place in a country that, just a decade ago saw states engage in a rush to pass bans on the use of Sharia law [40]. The power of the COVID burqa image, and the danger it poses, comes in part from the continuing undercurrent of Islamophobia in Western societies. This is a sad commentary on the state of modern society.

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9 To take another example, a teacher in Nebraska was placed on administrative leave after a post on Facebook comparing anti-maskers to Ku Klux Klan members. The post stated: “Isn’t it strange they can breathe in this (a Ku Klux Klan mask) but not this (a COVID-19 mask)” [41]. One parent, supporting the dismissal, granted the teacher had the right to express personal beliefs but added: “[W]hen that belief is so strong and comparing our constitutional rights to a hate group, that is not going to be tolerated” [42]. The post included an image of a Ku Klux Klan hood, which helps explain the school’s reaction. It is hard to see a burqa—even a COVID burqa—generating a similar response.
4 Masking as an Unfree Act

But there is a second aspect of the connection between the mask and burqa that raises slightly different issues. The burqa is not only a symbol of Islam, it is also a symbol of covering one’s face. Indeed, the participants in the European debates over the face veil bans tried—with varying degrees of success—to shift the focus away from Islamophobia to the idea that in a modern societies one’s shows their face.

This leads to a shift from what the masks signify (the wearer is a sheep, or the mask is a burqa) to what the act of masking itself. Here, too, semiotics has much to offer. Of particular relevance is the insight that symbolic meaning of masking depends not only on mask itself but also what it covers—the face [16, pp. 42–44]. Just as important is what the act of putting on or taking off the mask symbolizes from a ritual perspective. For instance, does a mask signal a disguise, or is it an actual disguise [20, p. 594]? Or is the act of masking more an expression of power—proof, in effect, that the wearer owns the mask and therefore should be obeyed [17, p. 11]?

As Leone points out, the COVID mask makes it difficult to tell whether someone is smiling or frowning. [16, pp. 48–49]. At the same time, the mask connotes a type of invisibility that encourages “acting out”—at least in Western societies [16, p. 45]. These traits complicate mask wearing, especially by children. But the major impediment to mask wearing—and reason for dislike of the mask—comes from the connection between mask wearing and freedom. As we have seen, showing one’s face can be a symbol of radical, egalitarian transparency [6]. By contrast, masking—especially burqa wearing—is a symbol of un-freedom. Thus, one justification of the European face veil bans was that they freed burqa wearers from something at least some of them were compelled to wear [9, 24, 25].

The theme of freedom was also present in the debates over masking that began in August and September 2021 as children across the United States returned to school. The emphasis was on the act of masking, which some anti-maskers saw as child abuse. In some instances, the label might be deserved, as when a Las Vegas, Nevada teacher taped a mask on a 9 year old student who did not immediately restore his mask after getting a drink of water [43]. At other times, however, rested on assumptions—much like assumptions made about burqa wearers—that the anti-COVID mask was “abusive” because it made human communication impossible [44].

For instance, Jamie Allard, a state legislator in Alaska, claimed that mask wearing took a toll “on the mental health of children” because it makes it hard for them to speak and hear properly [44].10 While there is some truth here—masks can impede communication in some instances—the claim that masking is always abusive because it impedes communication is eerily similar to the claim that women who wear the burqa always do so under compulsion, and cannot possibly communicate with others while wearing the burqa [9, 24]. And yet, just as some burqa wearers do so volun-

10 Allard also argued that masking interferes with breathing [44], which is a problem with masking—but one that does not relate as directly to the European tradition of radical transparency. The same can be of Carlson’s objection to 2 year olds being required to mask [1]. These pragmatic objections do not involve rejecting masking in general. Nor do they make masking as an inherently abusive act. Rather, they call for an expansion of exceptions to masking.
tarily, and can communicate with others [24], mask wearers—even children—are able to survive school despite wearing masks.

What both examples show is the strong association—in Western cultures—between showing one’s face and freedom. This is a tradition dating back to at least the French Revolution and is ultimately grounded in Enlightenment values of individual freedom and human dignity. As such, it is—unlike the COVID burqa—not an inherently hateful framing of mask wearing. The statement of the Belgian Constitutional Court, upholding its mask ban in 2012—that masks strip the wearer of what makes them a unique individual [11]—applies as much in the American elementary school classroom as it does on the European continent.

One sees this, once again, in Carlson’s argument against mask wearing. There are repeated invocations of freedom (“Masks have always been incompatible with a free society”), individuation (“Masks strip people of their identity as individuals”) and the given, axiomatic necessity of showing one’s face (“If I can’t see your face, I can’t know you”) [1]. At first, this is a positive claim—showing one’s face is good; or, one should be free to do so. But freedom is an unstable stopping point. As the French revolutionary experience demonstrated, it humans have freedom, and showing one’s face is natural, then covering one’s face must be suspicious.

And it was especially suspicious during that narrow sliver of time in early 2021 where the arrival of vaccines seemed to portend a rapid end to the pandemic. “Why would anyone wear a mask now that COVID is almost over?” is a similar question to: “Why do we need carnival (or carnival masks) now every citizen shared the same equal status?” In 1790 the Paris Department of Police not only abolished carnival, they also banned masks [6, p. 92]. While there has been debate about whether, in the aftermath of COVID, mask wearing will persist in the United States as it has in East Asia following earlier pandemics in the 20th and 21st centuries [45], the logic of revealing one’s face—its felt necessity—is a countervailing force. If this is true, then perhaps, in the United States, masking will continue to signify lack of freedom, at least in some circumstances.

One added reason for this in the United States relates to the experience with the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, a time when masking was seen as impeding not just human communication but democratic deliberation. For evidence of this, consider a 1926 editorial in the *New Republic* entitled “The Klan Sheds Its Hood” [46]. The article blames “secrecy” for the growing apathy in the Klan’s own ranks, adding that since the Klan has become an anti-immigrant political party, it should outgrow its “the innate small-boy traits” of “secrecy” and “dressing up” [46]. This was because it is “characteristic of us [Americans] as a people that we are not only proud of our political ideas but insist on discussing them” [46].

Thus, the hood and mask are bound up with secrecy and thus incompatible to a democratic society, a message the editorial makes in its closing sentence where it states that “the hooded figure on a horse must now give way to the perspiring orator and handbill distributor standing on the back seat of a Ford, using not the whip and tarbrush of yesterday, but the political argument and exhortation which are perennial” [46]. The question then becomes, how much of this discourse—clearly directed

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11 The ruling is described in *SAS v. France* [23] at para. 42 (citing para. B.21).
at the Klan, which did more than just wear masks—still applies today, when masks are worn for medical rather than political reasons? Is there, in other words, a way to balance the preference of seeing faces against the need to wear masks and, just as important, the freedom of those who, because of different assessments of risk, might still choose to do so after the acute part of the pandemic has subsided?

5 Conclusions

To some anti-maskers both the COVID mask, and mask wearing have become objects of hate—an outcome that is problematic given the practical necessity of wearing masks as a means of slowing the spread of COVID-19 [47]. This is evident in Tucker Carlson’s April 2021 piece, written at the very moment mask mandates (and the pandemic) looked as if they were ready to end. In fairness, perhaps Carlson imagined his piece would further speed along the demise of the hated mandates. This essay uses Carlson’s anti-mask rant to help show how, as a practical matter, anti-maskers view maskers, and masking. There themes have emerged: (1) maskers as sheep, (2) masks as COVID burqas, and (3) the practice of masking as an assault on freedom.

Of the three framings the COVID burqa framing is the most exclusionary and hateful. It presents the mask wearer as an alien social force seeking to dominate society. It does not seem widespread and Carlson, to his credit, does not do much with it—although he uses plenty of other negative images to describe masking. In the middle is the sheep metaphor. Sheep are derided as dumb, obedient and constantly getting themselves into trouble. The same is true of maskers—and this is critical for Carlson—especially those maskers who know better but tolerate the social control behind masking. Although he never mentions the word sheep, much of what Carlson says about masking fits into this paradigm. Again and again, Carlson asks his flock to do better, and reject the powers which have enforced masking despite what, according to him, the science says. The sheep image, so prevalent in anti-mask merchandizing, is powerful because it seeks to change minds. Seeking conversion rather than exclusion, Carlson aims to create lions out of sheep.

Ultimately, however, Carlson focus is on the connection between freedom and showing one’s face. Here Carlson is not alone. By highlighting face showing as a first principle of human conduct, Carlson taps into a tradition dating back to the French Revolution at the apex of which stands revolutionary transparency. Masking is associated with secrecy, distrust and aristocratic disguise that prevents genuine democratic discourse—an idea further reinforced in the United States by the experience with the Ku Klux Klan and the struggle against it during the 1920s. The lesson from the 1920s was clear—to combat the Klan, it must be “unmasked.” This lesson reinforced Carlson’s naturalistic view of unveiling: “If I can’t see your face, I can’t know you” [1]. This point, expressed as a universal truth, opens the door to distrusting those whose face one cannot see. This, in turn, opens the door to hate because the masker is seen as withholding something essential for human communication.

Precisely because it is so powerful, the unmasking as freedom metaphor is the most dangerous of the three. Not only does it equate taking medically necessary precautions—such as masking in crowded, poorly ventilated spaces or on public trans-
port—with a lack of freedom. It also denies the very freedom it espouses to those who, like some burqa wearing women, choose to don the mask of their own accord. A genuinely freedom loving approach to treating one’s face would appreciate that the one’s mask wearing decision is ultimately both a personal and social question. It depends both on the potential mask wearer, as well as on the other members of society who observe that person. There are certainly thorny issues: Does a criminal defendant have the right to see the face of someone who testifies against them? Can the defendant see the face of the judge sentencing them? But these questions start with the presumption that, where possible, masking should be a choice, not an obligation one way or another.

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