

Normalizing the Population: The Biopolitics of the “New Normal”

FEDERICO JOSE LAGDAMEO
ATENEO DE NAGA UNIVERSITY
ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY

Abstract

While the whole world is trying to get its bearings in the face of the radical changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, two prevailing attitudes or approaches have emerged: (1) a yearning for a return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy typified by what I call the “typhoon-shelter approach” and (2) recognizing the irreversibility of the current condition and seeking to establish a “new normal.” The biopolitical analysis employed in this paper reveals unintended consequences that slip through the mesh of traditional forms of critique centered on capital, ideology, or class conflict. Specifically, the “new normal” project prevents the free movement of peoples while ensuring the continuous flow of data through what Luciano Floridi calls the “infosphere.” This politics instills a xenophobia in which the other is construed as a disease while migrating the population to the realm of virtual reality.

Keywords: *biopolitics, COVID-19, Foucault, infosphere, normalization, pandemic*

The impacts of the global health crisis that is the COVID-19 pandemic may not be unprecedented, but it certainly is comparable to many watershed events in our history that have changed the way we live: the two great world wars, the Marcos dictatorship and Martial Law years, the EDSA revolutions, the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror, and even perhaps the irruption of information and communication technologies. With economies on life-support of loan borrowings; with populations under lockdown donning masks and personal protective equipment even while observing physical distancing; and with governments unprepared for the chaos unleashed by the threat of the virus; the conditions seemed ripe for an epoch shift.

Understandably enough, many sought to get their bearings in the face of these dire circumstances, adopting either of the following two attitudes or two hopes. The first is that of hopeful waiting—naively at that—for a return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy. The second is prefaced by the recognition of the irreversibility of the situation and of hoping to establish a new normalcy to it, a “new normal” so to speak.

The first attitude or hope is characterized by what I call the “typhoon-shelter approach”: people hunker down in shelters of various kinds and brace for the typhoon, waiting for it to make its way out. Upon its passage, people leave the shelters, clear the rubble, start rebuilding, and aim to return to how life was prior to the storm. In the Philippines, a country slammed by twenty typhoons on average in a year,

the population had grown accustomed to this cycle of drama (before), trauma (during), and hallelujah (after).

The first hope and its corresponding “typhoon-shelter approach” were in view when the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably reached Philippine shores. With the imposition of some form of lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of SARS-CoV-2, it was discernible that many had adopted the typhoon-shelter approach, having been seduced by the appeal of “just waiting it out ‘til the lockdown is lifted.” While a study of it may yet be forthcoming, there is ample evidence that many have construed the pandemic as a storm that would wreak havoc for a given period of time. Like all storms, it would eventually leave them alone, allowing them to return to a relatively peaceful life. When the pandemic would finally do this—and how people hoped it did this—they would return (certainly traumatized, but nonetheless relieved) to the life that they knew prior to the advent of this health crisis. However, it has begun to dawn on many who cherished such a hope that this is no longer the case, not only not anytime soon, but never.

Assuming this bleak reality, the central point of what this essay aims to analyze lies with the second attitude or hope clung to by many, that of establishing a new normalcy within the conditions set by the pandemic. Specifically, I intend to examine this project of the “new normal” through the lens of biopolitical analysis initiated by Michel Foucault. I argue that such an analysis is highly instructive for revealing what I take to be the project’s unintended consequences, ones

which precisely slip through the mesh of critique centered on capital, ideology, or class conflict. I show that the “new normal” project employs or proposes normalization technologies that restrict or prevent the free movement of peoples, while ensuring the continuous flow of data. Similarly, these normalization technologies instill a xenophobia in which the other is construed as a disease. And finally, these hasten the population’s migration to what Luciano Floridi calls the “infosphere.”

This essay has three parts, the first of which discusses the analyses of the socio-political implications of the pandemic; these analyses are emblematic of the abovementioned second attitude or hope in that they are committed to the project of a “new normal.” Meanwhile, the second part elaborates the approach afforded by Foucaultian biopolitical analysis to normalization projects such as that of the “new normal.” Finally, the third part identifies the crucial unintended consequences of the “new normal” project discerned through such an analysis and argues that these consequences require carefully considered responses from us.

From “Old Normal” to “New Normal”

Admittedly, several thinkers have offered analyses of the pandemic’s socio-political implications, while espousing the second attitude or hope for a new normal. One of the more remarkable thinkers is Slavoj Žižek with his book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, more because of the speed with

which that insight had been repackaged into a new book and not necessarily his insight itself. Published on March 24, 2020, nearly three months since China reported the outbreak of the disease to the World Health Organization in December 31, 2019, the book reiterates many of Žižek’s polemics against the prevailing neoliberal and technocapitalist system, and against the “fake leftist” thought that poses as its contrary.¹

The gist of Žižek’s book is its argument for the establishment of a new type of communism after the rejection of prevailing capitalist and neoliberalist ways of thinking and behaving. For him, the possibility of this type of communism becomes compelling when governments suspend the demands of the market economy and act to preserve and protect its population.

This is where my notion of “Communism” comes in, not as an obscure dream but simply as a name for what is already going on (or at least perceived by many as a necessity), measures which are already being considered and even partially enforced. It’s not a vision of a bright

¹ See for instance Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso Books, 2010). The mention and employment of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s five-stage schema on grief (on page xi) is telling for not only did it constitute for Žižek the five-part structure of the book; he also rehearsed it for his analysis of the pandemic in his most recent opus. Of course, it may be argued that, in fact, the former book evinces that Žižek had precognition of the 2020 global health crisis as far back as 2010. On the other hand, it can be pointed out that what actually occurred with the later book was a retrofitting of the event of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis to a decade-long framework, one wherein Žižek gleefully reminds critics and confreres alike that “I told you so.”

future but more one of “disaster Communism” as an antidote to disaster capitalism. Not only should the state assume a much more active role, organizing the production of urgently needed things like masks, test kits and respirators, sequestering hotels and other resorts, guaranteeing the minimum of survival of all new unemployed, and so on, doing all of this by abandoning market mechanisms. Just think about the millions, like those in the tourist industry, whose jobs will, for some time at least, be lost and meaningless. Their fate cannot be left to mere market mechanisms or one-off stimuluses.²

For Žižek, the pandemic serves as an opportunity to dismantle the old normalcy provided and conditioned by neoliberal capitalism and establish a “global organisation that can control and regulate the economy as well as limit the sovereignty of nation states when needed.”³ His call is to defy market logic that dictates a rapid return to old normalcy of getting the economy going—the same economy that gravely disadvantaged many at this precise time—instead of alleviating suffering. Žižek’s project of a new normal entails thus, an end to what he viewed as the socio-economic

² Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic: Covid-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

injustices levied by the “old normal” at the vast majority of the world’s population.

In a similar vein, the philosopher Bruno Latour pitched the idea that the global response against the pandemic is a possible “dress rehearsal” for how we can globally respond against the distinct threat of climate change. In an opinion piece that originally appeared in *Le Monde*, Latour, who is well known for his environmental advocacy, echoes the anthropogenic argument for the cause of the ecological crisis, even as he notes this argument’s reversal in the present health crisis:

. . . in the health crisis, it may be true that humans as a whole are “fighting” against viruses—even if they have no interest in us and go their way from throat to throat killing us without meaning to. The situation is tragically reversed in ecological change: this time, the pathogen whose terrible virulence has changed the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the planet is not the virus at all, it is humanity!⁴

For Latour and many left-thinking political thinkers, the old normal of our exploitative relationship with the planet has reached its expiration date, hastened by the onset of the

⁴ Bruno Latour, “Is This a Dress Rehearsal?,” *Critical Inquiry*, March 26, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>.

virus. Their diagnosis is unequivocal: We must not turn back; we cannot afford to turn back.⁵

Judith Butler echoes Latour's and Žižek's diagnoses, launching a scathing attack (quite fashionable in these times) on government incompetence, on widespread paranoia and xenophobia, and on ineffective health care systems. She laments that "[s]ocial and economic inequality will make sure that the virus discriminates. The virus alone does not discriminate, but we humans surely do, formed and animated as we are by the interlocking powers of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and capitalism."⁶ By far, however, Butler's main claim in this timely essay is the need to recognize capitalism's reach even in this most critical of times and halting it. She insists on building greater solidarity with each other but most especially with the victims of the rapaciousness of existing social inequalities. This, her essay implies, should be the "new normal."

The above analyses of the three philosophers are joined by many political analysts' predictions of the future "new normal" for a world still reeling from the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of J. Scott Carpenter, he foresees the further erosion of democracies as citizens are

⁵ Matthew Stadlen, "Coronavirus is a moment to change our way of life," *New Statesman*, April 12, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/04/coronavirus-moment-change-our-way-life>.

⁶ Judith Butler, "Capitalism Has its Limits," *Verso*, March 30, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>.

persuaded to concur with authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian states in the latter's use of means and mechanisms (privacy invading ones) to monitor the population in the name of health security.⁷ Carpenter predicts that a US-China divide will deepen and widen with many nations afflicted by the pandemic turning to China—and not to the US—for aid and know-how because of the former's alleged success in dealing with the crisis. The pivot toward China spells disaster for weak democracies as the Chinese Communist Party would not only exact overt quid pro quos in national foreign policies of these countries but would also peddle authoritarian values and thinking to them.⁸

Writing for the *New Statesman*, Jeremy Cliffe warns of socio-economic catastrophe for the Global South where health care and basic needs resources are currently sorely inadequate to the needs of its population.⁹ The Global South governments' increased spending to tide over its hungry and desperate citizens has led to enormous borrowing from global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In fact, the IMF has reported that

⁷ J. Scott Carpenter, "Lasting Effects of COVID-19 on States and Societies," *Russia in Global Affairs*, April 1, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/lasting-effects-covid-19/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Jeremy Cliffe, "Coronavirus hits the Global South," *New Statesman*, April 22, 2020, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/south-america/2020/04/coronavirus-hits-global-south>.

out of its 189 member countries, 102 have already asked for financial help, which is unprecedented according to Cliffe.

Countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, Ecuador, Sierra Leone, Venezuela, Syria, Bangladesh, Myanmar, South Sudan, Nigeria, India, and the Philippines are confronted with the departure of foreign investments, the plunge in demand for commodity exports, and the drying up of the tourism industry, making the outlook bleaker for these Global South nations. Hence, Cliffe foresees that “debt defaults, soaring unemployment, mass impoverishment, famines and ‘existential’ damage to economies” would be the “new normal” for the Global South.¹⁰

Closer to home, the struggle to establish a sense of “new” normalcy is also an overriding concern. Edilberto de Jesus’s appraisal of the Philippine education system offers a specific analysis of what is going to be left behind with the old normal as learning institutions strive to adapt to “new normal” conditions. De Jesus, a professor emeritus at the Asian Institute of Management and a former Philippine secretary of education, agrees that, much like everything else, how education is conducted in the country would have to change because of the social and economic implications of the pandemic. He frames his analysis within the context of estimated revenue losses at P55 billion by August 2020 and P142 billion by December 2020 for the education sector. To recoup these losses, De Jesus believes

¹⁰ Jeremy Cliffe, “Coronavirus hits the Global South.”

that schools would have to return to operations but in a different mode. The old normal of delivering instruction in face-to-face format is not feasible in a world being normalized by physical distancing.¹¹

De Jesus adds that while the shift to online digital platforms for education has accelerated, it needs to be accelerated even more. Presently proliferating online lectures or webinars are symptomatic of this. He explains that such a shift entails that learning for class groups would be asynchronous and at the student's pace or convenience. Unfortunately, it also keenly underscores the problem of access to online connectivity for both students and instructors. For De Jesus, the mode of encounter between the pedagogue and the pupil undergoes a dramatic transformation with the departure from the "old" normal in education.

House Bill 6623 or "The New Normal for the Workplace and Public Spaces Act of 2020" is the present bill pending in the Philippines' House of Representatives on the "New Normal." It is overtly a "new normal" project by the Philippine government. Principally authored by the House Speaker himself, Allan Peter Cayetano, the bill is unequivocal about its intent. The section on its "declaration

¹¹ Edilberto De Jesus, "Going Back to School and the Challenges Ahead," *Rappler*, May 1, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/259511-analysis-going-back-to-school-challenges-coronavirus> (site discontinued). The article is no longer available through this link. However, it has been reposted here: <https://www.feu.edu.ph/index.php/2020/05/going-back-to-school-and-the-challenges-ahead/>.

of policy” registers the aim of installing a “new normal” simply meaning a return to “business as usual”:

The resumption of economic and social activities following the implementation of various mechanisms instituting public health, safety, and security measures through community quarantines or forms thereof in order to stem the transmission of the Covid-19 virus requires the institution and establishment of standards and protocols that would simultaneously protect the vulnerable from the disease and prevent transmission from asymptomatic or untested carriers of the virus, while ensuring the restoration of livelihood opportunities and sources of income for all, especially the country’s poor.¹²

The efforts such as the above that aim to “fix” the situation so that the economy can get going again are arguably evident attempts to return to the world of neoliberal capitalism. In a fashion, this endeavor conforms to the typhoon-shelter model articulated earlier: assess the damage while the typhoon is ongoing; repair what can be repaired; and after the storm has elapsed, continue as before but with some modifications. Contrastingly, the “new

¹² Alan Peter S. Cayetano et al., “An Act Establishing Policies and Regulations for the New Normal for the Workplace and Public Spaces and Instituting Penalties for Violations thereof,” Section 2, http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_18/HB06623.pdf.

normal” Žižek, Latour, and Butler aspire for is a complete overhaul and overturning of the current system. Precisely, they have identified this system to be in need of transformation, not repair.

Regardless of differing intentions, the project for a “new normal” is undoubtedly a response or reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project’s thrust of installing a new set of institutions, policies, protocols, behavior, and thinking in the face of the threat of death from the virus is noticeably oblivious to its possible inadvertent effects. For like any project, the “new normal” has unintended consequences.

Biopolitics and Normalization

The use of Michel Foucault’s biopolitical analysis affords us the capability to discern and access some of these consequences, of which standard Marxist analysis may be mute. An event such as the COVID-19 pandemic together with the socio-political responses to it may not be captured adequately by the rubrics of class interest and conflict as well as materialist ontology and dialectic. This is because unintended consequences slip through the Marxist mesh because these are not simply a matter of class interest.

As a philosopher and historian, Foucault was deeply interested in understanding the workings of power relations in the social fabric. He sought to expose how power relations operate instead of who wields power and why. He defined power as “a set of actions on possible actions” or as “the

conduct of conducts' and the management of possibilities," clarifying that it "exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though . . . it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures."¹³ In other words, power as such only exists within a relational field and pertains to actions that structure other actions in some particular manner. Colin Gordon explains this further:

The two ideas that came to guide Foucault's own investigation were those of the *productivity of power* (power relations are integral to the modern social productive apparatus, and linked to active programs for the fabricated part of the collective substance of society itself) and the *constitution of subjectivity through power relations* (the individual impact of power relations does not limit itself to pure repression but also comprises the intention to teach, to mold conduct, to instill forms of self-awareness and identities).¹⁴

As a structuring of the possibilities of actions, power relations are enacted, instantiated, and made operational by technologies either as objects (e.g., face masks, testing kits),

¹³ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2000), 340-341.

¹⁴ Colin Gordon, "Introduction" in Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2000), xix.

practices (physical distancing, quarantines, lockdowns), knowledge (medicine and epidemiology), modes of organization (hospital, school, prison), or frequently, by the conglomeration of these.¹⁵ These technologies of power determine the possibilities of actions acted upon within the same relational field.

Foucault's examination of technologies of power employed analyses of disciplinary as well as of biopolitical technologies. The latter type of analysis differed from but served to complement the former approach. Foucault explained that “[u]nlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power [biopolitics] is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species.”¹⁶ As such, biopolitical analysis was not directed toward the process of the individualization of human bodies; rather, it focused on the biopolitical process of how the mass of individuals as a totality is managed beginning with their birth, development, up until their death. It is an analysis focused on how a population of individualized humanity is managed toward specific socio-economic-political ends by technologies of power. These ends tend to be, in view of

¹⁵ For a discussion on the technological instantiation of power in Foucault, see Federico Jose Lagdameo, “Heidegger, Foucault, and an Affordance Theory of Technology” (PhD, dissertation, Ateneo de Manila University, 2019), 112–122.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 243.

Foucault's critical inquiries, directed toward the establishment of what would constitute and be construed as "normal" in a society.

Conspicuously and in many instances, Foucault had pointed to the normalizing thrust of technologies of power, elaborating how they produce categories of what is acceptable (the sane, the healthy, the normal) and what is not (the mad, the sick, the deviant).¹⁷ For him, these technologies effect the constitution not only of these categories but also the very objects that fit them.

In the age we're concerned with, the aim of all these institutions—factories, schools, psychiatric hospitals, hospitals, prisons—is not to exclude but, rather, to attach individuals. The factory doesn't exclude individuals: it attaches them to a production apparatus. The school doesn't exclude individuals, even in confining them: it fastens them to an apparatus of knowledge transmission. The psychiatric hospital doesn't exclude individuals: it attaches them to an apparatus of correction, to an apparatus of normalization of individuals. The same is true of

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalifa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa (London: Routledge, 2006); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003); and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality - Vol I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

the reformatory or the prison: even if the effects of these institutions are the individual's exclusion, their primary aim is to insert individuals into an apparatus of normalization of people. The factory, the school, the prison, or the hospitals have the object of binding the individual to a process of production, training, or correction of the producers. It's a matter of guaranteeing production, or the producers, in terms of a particular norm.¹⁸

In this regard, it is unsurprising to see Foucault link the use of statistical and scientific data as elements in the management of population. For these are employed to establish a norm and the normal. He remarks that “[i]t is these processes—the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so on—together with a whole series of related economic and political problems . . . which . . . become biopolitics' first objects of knowledge and the targets it seeks to control.”¹⁹

What biopolitical analysis aims to shed light on are precisely these processes cloaked by the veneer of scientific respectability—these technologies of power—that are deployed to manage swaths of the population toward some socio-economic-political goal, which in this case is their

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2000), 78.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 243–244.

normalization. Biopolitical analysis or critique intends to lay bare how the government of human life is undertaken and occurring in a specific present, which in our case is how artefacts such as face masks, testing kits; practices of physical distancing, quarantines, lockdowns; knowledge of medicine and epidemiology; and modes of organization implemented by and in hospitals, schools, quarantine facilities enable the re-configuration of human life to assume a specific mode of existence.

Particularly, biopolitical analysis probes these objects and processes (with their overt aims) for the unintended consequences that they afford: What social relations do these normalization processes produce beyond their intended aims? What forms of control, restriction, circumscription do these processes enable and enact, and to what extent? And most importantly, what identities do they induce or form on those undergoing the said processes or availing of these artefacts? The answers to these queries are not conditioned by class interest or ideology. In this can be discerned biopolitical analysis's advantage over Marxist analysis: the capacity to inquire into the unintended consequences of technologies of power.

The Unintended Consequences

The “new normal” is marked by normalization technologies currently at work: laws, policies, protocols, enforced behaviors, artefacts, cultural values (e.g., essential work, contemporary heroism), notions of what count as true

(i.e., scientific information about the virus), and what count as false (i.e., ideological information about it). Through these, populations are being normalized or managed to attain a specific and valorized mode of existence in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these normalization technologies, how human life is to continue and what form its different facets would assume are being determined.

Consider the following: To flatten the curve—that is to say, to prevent the further spread of the disease—people have been required to observe the practice of physical distancing and to use artefacts such as face masks as well as personal protective equipment or gear. Other normalizing practices like quarantines or lockdowns have been enforced as well as constant self-surveillance and reporting to authorities. The quarantines themselves have been coupled with the accelerated adoption of working online or entering into work-from-home arrangements.

What do normalization technologies enacted by the above practices and artefacts achieve that are not reflected in the overt aims of the latter? In other words, what are their unintended consequences? To provide an answer to that Foucaultian question, I employ Luciano Floridi's theory on humanity's migration to the infosphere.²⁰

Floridi is a professor of philosophy and ethics of information at the University of Oxford. He is one of the

²⁰ Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 43–58.

leading voices in the field of philosophy of technology. His theory on the ongoing migration to the infosphere, which I use here as a resource to append to Foucaultian biopolitical analysis, is premised on Floridi's own argument for the "fourth revolution." Taking place in our era, this fourth revolution comes in the throes of the first three that were instigated by Copernicus (humanity's decentered place in the universe), Darwin (its decentered place in the biological world), and Freud (its decentered place in the realm of pure and transparent consciousness). Fathered by Alan Turing, this revolution according to Floridi had its seeds sown earlier by the work of Blaise Pascal with his *Pascalina* and by Thomas Hobbes's subtle but groundbreaking claim that thinking is nothing more than reasoning, that is, calculating. Nonetheless, it was Turing who dealt the final blow to whatever privileged position humanity had claimed for itself. Due to Turing's calculating machine, the precursor to the modern computer, human beings have been displaced as the only thinking being in the world.

For Floridi, what the fourth revolution eventually accomplished was the emergence of a new environment, a new territory, a new place and context in which we find ourselves—the infosphere. In turn, this new environment and our displacement from the spatiotemporal one enable the forging of a new identity of being "inforgs" or informational organisms. Floridi explains:

We are witnessing an epochal, unprecedented migration of humanity from its Newtonian,

physical space to the infosphere itself as its new environment, not least because the latter is absorbing the former. As digital immigrants, like Generation X and Generation Y, are replaced by digital natives, like Generation Z, the latter will come to recognize no fundamental difference between the infosphere and the physical world, only a change in perspective. When the migration is complete, my guess is that Generation Z will increasingly feel deprived, excluded, handicapped, or poor to the point of paralysis and psychological trauma whenever it is disconnected from the infosphere, like fish out of water. One day, being an inforg will be so natural that any disruption in our normal flow of information will make us sick.²¹

Now, I argue that the lockdowns and the quarantines, which had been implemented and reported to have led to intensifying the rapid and increased access of the internet, have hastened this migration process to the infosphere.²²

²¹ Floridie, *The Fourth Revolution*, 98.

²² See: Louis Fourie, “Tech News: Technology Usage Patterns during Covid-19,” *IOL*, May 22, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/tech-news-technology-usage-patterns-during-covid-19-48305674>; also Yevgeniy Sverdlik, “See How Internet Traffic Has Shifted in Big Metros During the Lockdown,” *Data Center Knowledge*, March 25, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.datacenterknowledge.com/networks/see-how-internet-traffic-has-shifted-big-metros-during-lockdown>; and Mark Beech, “COVID-19 Pushes Up Internet Use 70% and Streaming More than 12%, First Figures Reveal,” *Forbes*, March 25, 2020, accessed May 22, 2020,

I cite a pre-pandemic study conducted by the Pew Research Center that had already noted the pattern in the usage of information and communication technologies or ICTs (for instance, broadband subscriptions during the last two decades) to have steadily increased.²³ I expect and find it unsurprising, therefore, to see a surge in ICT use when access to “real-life” or analogue experiences are being severely curtailed by “new normal” prohibitions.

Admittedly, this prevailing trend in online access and consequent habitation of the infosphere is tempered by the fact that despite the increased widespread use of ICTs, nearly half of the world’s population—or 3.7 billion people—still do not have internet access, as reported by the World Economic Forum.²⁴ In the Philippines, for instance, De Jesus had already noted that in the scramble to shift to digital learning, “most students [still] lack the funds for the phone or computer devices/peripherals and adequate internet and bandwidth services to meet on-line learning requirements on a sustainable basis.”²⁵ Similarly, accounts from neighboring Indonesia reveal that in Jakarta, 87

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/25/covid-19-pushes-up-internet-use-70-streaming-more-than-12-first-figures-reveal/#787b31853104>.

²³ Shannon Schumacher and Nicholas Kent, “8 charts on internet use around the world as countries grapple with COVID-19,” *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, April 2, 2020, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://pewrsr.ch/2wOyAYy>.

²⁴ See Douglas Broom, “Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before,” *World Economic Forum*, April 22, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobile/>.

²⁵ De Jesus, “Going Back to School.”

percent of children can get online; but in Indonesia's biggest province, Papua, the figure is less than 30 percent.²⁶ Notwithstanding the above, there is no denying that the migration has accelerated dramatically during the lockdown periods and has continued in the “new normal” condition.

A biopolitical analysis of obtaining normalization technologies reveal that they limit the free movement of peoples' bodies while ensuring the continuous flow of data. In fact, the implemented quarantines, which are a response to the scientific analyses of the coronavirus and which enforce restrictions in mobility and travel of populations during this time of the crisis, have prompted an explosion of data. Previously pay-walled data streams like indexed academic journals or “premium” videos of Broadway musicals and theater performances had become more widely accessible.

Further, biopolitical analysis shows that the science of epidemiology has promulgated the truth about the virus's transmission, a truth that led to the institution of “health and safety protocols,” among which are the practices of physical distancing and quarantines. In turn, these have led to furthering and intensifying existing practices such as working from home (WFH) as well as e-commerce. The World Trade Organization noted the latter in its published “Information Note” stating that

²⁶ “School Closures in Poor Countries could be Devastating,” *The Economist*, July 18, 2020, accessed July 22, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/07/18/school-closures-in-poor-countries-could-be-devastating>.

[t]he enforcement of social distancing, lockdowns and other measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has led consumers to ramp up online shopping, social media use, internet telephony and teleconferencing, and streaming of videos and films. . . . This has resulted in spikes in business-to-consumers (B2C) sales and an increase in business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce. The increase in B2C sales is particularly evident in online sales of medical supplies, household essentials and food products.²⁷

Evidently, with the prevailing normalization technologies (knowledge production from epidemiology and other health sciences, social practices of WFH, quarantines, online commerce), goods and data remain free to circulate while people's bodies are restricted and constricted in their movements.

Alarmingly, this restriction of movement engendered a circumscription in which the population's self-isolation had a further unintended effect of stigmatizing certain people. We saw this with horror and outrage in episodes wherein medical frontliners and even security guards of medical hospitals become objects of aversion and even violence

²⁷ See WTO Secretariat, "Information Note: E-Commerce, Trade and the Covid-19 Pandemic," May 4, 2020, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/ecommerce_report_e.pdf.

because of the perception that they are carriers of the deadly virus. We saw this in the growing and uncritical hatred of “China,” a term and concept that glosses over crucial distinctions: the Chinese nation as a whole, the Chinese people as a race, and the Chinese state government ran by the Chinese Communist Party. Xenophobia, or a version of it, is another unintended consequence of the project of the “new normal” wherein the “other” is constructed as a disease, harmful and infectious. Consequently, we may discern a new binary identity that the employed and proposed normalization technologies have produced: the diseased and the uninfected.

Not coincidentally, it is only in the infosphere, in the online world, where the risks of contamination and death are absent. This thought, this truth, I aver, drives many to this world. Hence, more intensely, the experience of the social realm is taking place in the digital platforms of social media technologies. And that experience of the social runs the gamut of activities that in past generations had enculturated us, had humanized us: community life, education, religion, the arts, commerce. The new normal inexorably brings us to this world, the infosphere, as our new habitat. In turn, this transforms us and reconfigures our identities to that of being inforgs, organisms no different from other data processing (creating, consuming, storing, “sharing”) entities.

Finally, any discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic would be remiss if it neglected what has become emblematic

of the “new normal”: the face mask. A news report from the *South China Morning Post* explored the effects of mask-wearing as part of the “new normal.”²⁸ The report reiterated of course, the health advantages of the practice; however, it also spelled out its impact on social interaction. Citing Fan Liu, an assistant professor of decision sciences and marketing at Adelphi University in New York, the report explained that visual cues afforded by facial expressions are removed when we wear masks, hereby making interpretation of others’ behaviors and intentions more difficult. These non-verbal cues signaled by smiles, frowns, smirks, lip movement, cheek twitches are crucial. Their absence shifts focus from the behavioral process to behavioral outcomes.

Undoubtedly, wearing masks protect us from infection and from infecting others. From the standpoint of biopolitical analysis, however, its unintended effect is that the mask adds another social layer of distance between people, reinforcing the experience and sense of isolation and even paranoia. The mask is hardly a neutral piece of equipment.

In this regard, it is quite remarkable that Foucault described technologies of power as “[s]mall acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, *apparently innocent*, but profoundly suspicious,

²⁸ Associated Press, “‘We’re Dogs without Tails’: How Face Masks Affect Human Interaction – and What To Do About It,” *South China Morning Post*, April 26, 2020, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/article/3081432/were-dogs-without-tails-how-face-masks-affect-human>.

mechanisms that obeyed economies too shameful to be acknowledged, or pursued petty forms of coercion.”²⁹ They were, in his distinctive prose, far from being guileless instruments whose employment and its outcome are determined by their makers and users. Instead, like Trojan horses, they carry within themselves packets of scripts—which no one had conspired to concoct, Foucault insists—for behaving and being. Hence, while a Žižek or a Butler decries the “old normal’s” exploitative mode of existence and enjoins the configuration of a “new normal” characterized by governments upending market logic and acting to serve their peoples’ interests; a Foucault would interrogate such a project—no matter how benevolent—for their unintended effects.

Consequently, one may view the project of the “new normal” as the intention to establish a set of behaviors and protocols in societal living while the pandemic looms threateningly. Simply put, it intends to promulgate a new set of “normal” behaviors and ways of thinking within the context of an ongoing global health crisis. Nonetheless and frequently unbeknownst to the majority, the project also establishes new ways of existing and inhabiting, directing us toward a new way of being human. Certainly, this in itself is not deplorable. What would be worrisome, however, is when the consequences and effects of this project of the

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 139; italics mine.

“new normal,” despite the best of intentions, effectively reduce human life to a mere function, feature, or experience. Troublingly, the biopolitical analysis of this project shows these to be so.

Bibliography

- Associated Press. “‘We’re Dogs without Tails’: How Face Masks Affect Human Interaction – and What to Do About It.” *South China Morning Post*, April 26, 2020. Accessed April 26, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/article/3081432/were-dogs-without-tails-how-face-masks-affect-human>.
- Beech, Mark. “COVID-19 Pushes Up Internet Use 70% and Streaming More than 12%, First Figures Reveal.” *Forbes*, March 25, 2020. Accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/25/covid-19-pushes-up-internet-use-70-streaming-more-than-12-first-figures-reveal/#787b31853104>.
- Broom, Douglas. “Coronavirus has Exposed the Digital Divide Like Never Before.” *World Economic Forum*, April 22, 2020. Accessed May 30, 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/>.
- Butler, Judith. “Capitalism has Its Limits.” *Verso*, March 30, 2020. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>.

- Carpenter, J. Scott. “Lasting Effects of COVID-19 on States and Societies.” *Russia in Global Affairs* 18, no. 2 (April–June 2020): 41–42. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-2-41-42.
- Cliffe, Jeremy. “Coronavirus Hits the Global South,” *New Statesman*, April 22, 2020. Accessed May 6, 2020. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/south-america/2020/04/coronavirus-hits-global-south>.
- Clover, Joshua. “The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics: A Response to Bruno Latour.” *Critical Inquiry*, March 29, 2020. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response-to-bruno-latour/>.
- De Jesus, Edilberto. “Going Back to School and the Challenges Ahead.” *Rappler*, May 1, 2020. Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/259511-analysis-going-back-to-school-challenges-coronavirus> (site discontinued).
- The Economist*. “School Closures in Poor Countries Could be Devastating.” July 18, 2020. Accessed July 22, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/07/18/school-closures-in-poor-countries-could-be-devastating>.
- Floridi, Luciano. *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2003.
- . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- . *The History of Madness*. Edited by Jean Khalifa. Translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa. London: Routledge, 2006.
- . *The History of Sexuality - Vol I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

- . “The Meshes of Power.” In *Space, Knowledge and Power*. Edited by Jeremy Crampton and Stuart Elden. Translated by Gerald Moore. Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007.
- . *Society Must Be Defended – Lectures at the College de France: 1975-1976*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.
- . “The Subject and Power.” In *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Vol. 3. Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- . “Truth and Juridical Forms.” In *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Vol. 3. Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Fourie, Louis. “Tech News: Technology Usage Patterns during Covid-19.” *IOL*, May 22, 2020. Accessed May 30, 2020. <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/tech-news-technology-usage-patterns-during-covid-19-48305674>.
- Gordon, Colin. “Introduction.” In Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3. Edited by James D. Faubion. Translated by Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Lagdameo, Federico Jose. “Heidegger, Foucault, and an Affordance Theory of Technology.” PhD diss., Ateneo de Manila University, 2019.
- Latour, Bruno. “Is this a Dress Rehearsal?” *Critical Inquiry*, March 26, 2020. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/>.
- Schumacher, Shannon, and Nicholas Kent. “8 Charts on Internet Use around the World as Countries Grapple with COVID-19.”

- Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, April 2, 2020. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://pewrsr.ch/2wOyAYy>.
- Stadlen, Matthew. “Coronavirus is a Moment to Change Our Way of Life.” *New Statesman*, April 12, 2020. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/04/coronavirus-moment-change-our-way-life>.
- Sverdlik, Yevgeniy. “See How Internet Traffic has Shifted in Big Metros during the Lockdown.” *Data Center Knowledge*, March 25, 2020. Accessed May 30, 2020. <https://www.datacenterknowledge.com/networks/see-how-internet-traffic-has-shifted-big-metros-during-lockdown>.
- WTO Secretariat. “Information Note: E-Commerce, Trade and the COVID-19 Pandemic.” May 4, 2020. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/ecommerce_report_e.pdf.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso Books, 2010.
- . *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*. London: OR Books, 2020.