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## COVID-19: Anxiety vs Fear and the Dangers of Future Global Problems


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# COVID-19: Anxiety vs Fear and the Dangers of Future Global Problems

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## Abstract

My aim in this paper is to ask whether anxiety or fear would incentivise change when facing global problems. In the context of the SARS-CoV-2, I shall analyze the pandemic in the context of the ontological in structural, institutional and behavioral settings. Given that pandemics occur sparsely I have employed analytical theoretical construction, some statistical comparison and transcendental arguments in a logical nest of analytic inferences. I should note that I am not interested in what the wake of the pandemic looks like. This paper is about is to do so I appeal, in general terms on the philosophy or Martin Heidegger. Along the same lines, this time following Anthony Giddens, I argue, contrary to what many ascertain, that anxiety is a force which pushes people to want to return to normalcy; and fear to change. For example, Agamben argues that emergencies [fear] push for a return to normalcy and a state of exception is there to change in a systemic order. Again, I disagree, I posit that COVID-19 showed that fear is a more powerful engine of change. Anxiety which is stronger than fear to the contrary is that the strongest force to element to propel a return to normalcy is *anxiety* not *fear*. This paradox is what this paper's primoradial wants to contribute. Ontological dissonance or existential threats put into question our ability to *be-in* the world. What I would posit is that emergencies may lead to change while anxiety leads to stagnation and useless attempts to return to a pre-pandemic world.

## Keywords

Ontological Change, Heidegger: Pandemic, COVID-19, Normalcy, Global Problems

## 1. COVID-19 and Future Global Problems

This paper is about the relationship between the SARS-COVID 19 pandemic and

the ontological security of populations[1]. The pandemic is still, in a way, present in the lives of many. The argument of the paper is, I must admit, pessimistic: I want to argue that ontological anxiety, no fear, causes people take certain actions and *omit* other actions in order to regain ontological security, that is, a return to "normality"; the pessimistic aspect of the argument is that global has been minimized even ignored until it is too late. Global problems that challenge the ontological security of people are likely to become political battles. In a sense, rhis paper is, in a sense, a complement to a paper published in this Journal by Mattias Lehtinen and Tuukka Brunila (2021).

The authors argue that the pandemic can, usefully analyzed from an ontological perspective. Along these lines, they argue, the political ontology of people is met with the ontology of war. Based on Carl Schmitt and Thomas Hobbes, the paper proposes to focus our attention on the idea of war and the power of the State as fundamental elements in the response to the pandemic. The language of war made it easier for States to implement draconian and often ineffective measures to confront the pandemic. After all, Schmitt's notion of the State of Exception opens the door, as it were, for the State to suspend the rights of citizens for an undetermined period. My argument, on the contrary, is that the political ontology of war may not be as central an explanation as the authors make it out to be. Citizens "obey" (in a general sense) because of their need to go back to normality.

I posit that one could infer that populations are reluctant to tackle global issues as they have no interest in exposing themselves to ontological anxiety. Anthony Giddens argues that this sense of political ontology of stability is how people make sense of a hyper complex reality (Giddens, 1986). In order to act and proceed with their lives, repetition and habits require populations to avoid ontological dissonance, or as Deleuze and Guattari refer to as "Chaos" (Amott, 1999). A corollary of this assertion is that global problems such as future pandemics, climate change, etc., are not issues which populations are eager to tackle precisely because these issues challenge and affect their sense of normality by demanding radical changes in one's habits, people's capacity to live in habitual spaces recognizing that some changes agents would have to undertake respond to the presence of existential threats (e.g., climate change).

## 2. Ontological Security

The question of ontological security is both a metaphysical issue as much as a down-to-earth, as a lived experience of subjects. Like I mentioned earlier, populations seek security in order to plan, execute motivations, develop formulaic

[1]Following Giddens (1986, 1991) and Latour, I define ontological security as the state which the world is lived with a sense of certainty—certainty that tomorrow things will be normal (as they are today). It also can be defined, once again, following Giddens (1991: p. 342) that, "Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time—as being rather than constantly changing—in order to realize a sense of agency "(Giddens, 1991: p. 342; Laing, 1969: pp. 41-42 found in Miltzer, 2006).

constructs to simplify a complex reality, and finally make discursive sense with other subjects (Giddens, 1986). This responds to the fact that discourse and language games need stability for subjects to understand one another and form the basis of societal structures. One can easily see that the necessity of ontological security of the self is central—following Martin Heidegger for the safety of Dasein[2] (Heidegger, 1962). Our being-in-the-world depends largely on our expectations about it being realized. In other words, if one wakes up in the morning, one expects that the disposition of places and things are as they were the day before and will continue to be so the day after. One may argue that Dasein has coping mechanisms to deal with risk, uncertainty and ontological dissonance: insurances, savings, and the State and public goods and services are some examples. Notwithstanding the coping mechanisms Dasein may have, we all are sustained by structural stability. Such structural stability comes from, just to mention a few examples, like a healthy economy and a working financial system and, most importantly, the healthy, thus authentic Self (also see the examples given above) but the all depend largely on the status of the State's ontological security. I will not be able to explain this assertion beyond a few lines but for a thorough explanation of a State's ontological security see Mitzen (2006).

> The stability of the Dasein depends largely on the structural stability of the State and its institutions; it, furthermore, relies on the discursive "battle" between security and risk (c.f., Beck, 2009)… *Medium* states "[w]e dwell in our familiarity like fish dwell in water." (Medium, 2022: doi: https://thedangerousmaybe.medium.com/heideggers-concept-of-the-ontological-difference-1354dc459587). Medium, (Ibid.; emphasis in the original) drives the point home by asserting that, m[i]nside the functionality of our everydayness, we cannot encounter beings as a whole, but on rare occasions there will be a rupture in this order, a tear in this homogeneous fabric. These ruptures necessitate what Deleuze called the Encounter in *Difference and Repetition*, that is, an experience so intense that it disrupts our mode of access to the world. Heidegger's description of unreadiness-to-hand in *Being and Time*.

Our being-in-the-world develops through our sense of certainty about it (however wrong we may be), our projections to make sense of it, and the discursive acts that follow (c.f., Giddens, 1986). Heidegger proposed that Dasein emerges as it encounters the world in pre-given beings, like our bed, a table lamp, a cup, that we have access to. There are others to which we don't have *readily* access to: money, power, or the certain knowledge and the State. Being and Dasein is the existential phenomenon of describing and understanding what it is like to be a *human*. Humans exist in a different plane that objects do, as Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*; however, the older Heidegger, realized that in fact Dasein is not separated from the world that surrounds him/her. This

[2]Dasein comes from the German words "das", which means to be and sein, which means there. Heidegger referred to Dasein as agents from an existential perspective.

specification is very important for my discussion in this paper. The continuity between things, the world "out there" and Dasein is precisely what Bruno Latour (2003, 2021) argues in his Actor-Network theory, although, he takes Heidegger point in this subject as little further: for Latour (2003, 2018) there is a continuity between humans and things. He argues that in order to conceive sociological completeness one must give agency to things. This controversial (see Collins, 1985) stance deserves some unpacking as few, besides Latour and his followers, give full on agency to things.

In their book *Laboratory Life* Latour and Wooglar show that science is a construct. It necessitates, paper, computers, microscopes etc., and a series of tools/machines without which the project of science could not exist. Science is therefore a mediated "product." (Latour & Wooglar, 1976). The relationship between being and Dasein. The ontological mode of science, according to Latour, requires many *things* to become science, from a pencil to a particle collider. The very "nature of this things is what makes science possible and the ontological mode of science to be a concrete part of a mode of existence." Thus, Latour forms a complex but useful theoretical series of concepts—that of imparting agency to things. One must remember that the usage of things does not depend solely on who is using a tool or whatever it may be (Heidegger uses the example of a hammer)—a pencil's tip may wear off, the particle collider may have to be stopped for technical reasons (as it happened in 2018 to the Hadron Collider in Switzerland). Thus, Dasein must contend with the unexpected "surprises" that things may bring. Things, just like people, are not always available. On a second note, if there are also complications with technology, in ANT Latour (Latour & Wooglar, 1976) places non-human entities and humans in the same ontological plane (a position that changes later in Latour's career). In Latourian terms, a scientist can only be a scientist with the accompaniment of scientific sense. Once a scientist operates a thing, this becomes a monistic coupling, scientist and things are one complex. The ontological plane in which humans exist is complicated but not as complicated as one may think. It can be understood in Heideggerian terms as the world in continuity in which humans are "thrown,' as it were. And the more we spend time in it, the more one constructs one's sense of ontological security. This stability may well be disturbed by unknown forces—like COVID-19.

The world has fundamentally changed, although these changes are not readily visible as they are subjective and hidden by the State so as not to reveal the real dimensions of its preparedness for the next global catastrophe. However, it has also changed in the sense that the common structures that provided certainty, like the State, or the *institution* of science have been gravely challenged. The power of sovereignty is now a global biopower—by necessity (Foucault, 1993). In other words, the pandemic showed us the power over the biological lives of subjects. Now, the final stroke in the controlling of populations has come to pass just as Foucault had warned (Foucault, 1993): now our bodies are also suscepti-

ble to global problems, and while the State has become porous and thus not a structure in which one can readily rely upon. Beck identifies the global nature of problems, ranging from climate change, to wars, to pandemics, etc., all of which can easily penetrate or challenge a porous State, Let me cite Bretton as an example of our being during covid:

> During the COVID-19 pandemic[2] several studies warned that this mental health situation was only likely to get worse (see Xiong et al., 2020), and the research since validates that concern. The UK Office of National Statistics reported a significant increase in adults experiencing common mental health disorders (CMD) in early 2021, a pre-pandemic base rate of 10% rising to 21% (ONS, 2021). The NHS also reported that between March 2020 and June 2021, 1.2 million more antidepressant prescription items were issued than expected based on historical trends (Oakes, 2023, p. 426).

## 3. Anxiety, Fear and Interconnectedness

It is now time to go even deeper into the world of fear. Fear, according to Heidegger has a determinate object to which fear is oriented: being afraid of losing your job, fear of falling down a mountain when climbing it, etc. As I mentioned above according to Heidegger anxiety is linked to the ultimate sense of humanness: death. In this sense anxiety is a central component in Dasein. Fear, however, is not. It is present in the sense that once the object of fear is lifted, fear disappears or is attenuated. According to Whalen (2015, p. 33).

> …[b]eing towards-death raises a distinction between anxiety toward death and fearing toward death. While Being-toward-death is a unique concept (which allows us to examine Dasein in its wholeness), "Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety," by which Heidegger means that Being-toward-death is a manifestation of a certain form of anxiety. 115 One can fear biological death—perishing—which is a fear of an innerwordly occurrence. One can fear the pain that dying causes or can fear innerworldy things that may kill you, but this not a comprehension of death as an existential structure. The indefiniteness and insuperability of death only manifests through anxiety. This is because what one is anxious of in Being toward-death is not directed at any innewordly phenomenon, but, rather, an anxiety of the nothing: 'the nothing reveals itself in anxiety—but not as a being. In other words, Dasein fears the possibility of nothingness (or the possibility of impossibility), which cannot be, logically, attributed to any being.

To put it plainly, this conceptual discussion is here so as not to confuse the concept of fear with that of anxiety. Anxiety lives in nothingness whereas fear exists contextually. Specifically, the relationship between anxiety and death. As I had said, one can fear our biological death: dying in pain, alone, etc. Anxiety is truly an existential concept as anxiety is related to death in the same sense it relates to life. Death is a part of Dasein's conditions of living and it constructs

Dasein's sense of time and of its comprehension of what is to *be*-in-the-world (c.f. Harste, 2011). Whereas fear can disappear, as it is object oriented, anxiety does not disappear as it is related to nothingness—to death.

An important issue for this paper is that global problems, such as pandemics may, incorrectly, be thought of as a generator of fear, I argue that the case is much deeper—anxiety. The way in which people face fear is notably different to the way Dasein experiences anxiety. Anxiety can become the totality of being whereas fear cannot. Why? Because fear does not put into question the nature of Being whereas anxiety does—it is an existential "sentiment" link to nothingness.

Sure, fear may fear death, but death is not a constituent part of fear, whereas it is a constitutive part of anxiety. Anxiety as we have been saying is not object-oriented. Anxiety runs through the veins, brain cells and the totality of a person, making it an experience like no other: we are linked to the world by two defining modes of existence: life and dead, or a life-death complex. By the same token, the ontological experience of anxiety is a true disruption of our habitus (c.f., Bourdieu, 1977). And consequently, it is a powerful motivator to *ignore* the paths that bring us to ontological anxiety. In this sense, whether it is a pandemic, a financial crisis a world war, a nuclear disaster or climate change, people's first reaction is avoidance—it amounts to putting one's head under the sand. Chamberlain's famous strategy of appeasement is a good illustration.

Finally, I would like to end this section by pointing out that anxiety, being what it is, is a motivator for wanting normalcy. In other words, Dasein, or in plain English people-in-the-world, do not want to feel anxious in the sense described above—Dasein is reluctant to make radical changes to it everydayness. Normalcy and biographical continuity (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020) would seem, at least from a conceptual point of view, an antidote to anxiety. Even though this is doubtful, given Heidegger's explanations, but people following this logic, would always prefer normalcy to anxiety—which essentially comes down to facing death. Many therefore, don't want to engage in day-to-day activities which remind us that we as a species are in severe danger, from pandemics, to climate change, to nuclear war.

It is also noteworthy that many, especially in the Global South, live in permanent risk. The idea of a welfare State, except for Uruguay, is "unthinkable," especially for those who live day-to-day selling candy on the streets of Buenos Aires, Quito or Bogota. Notwithstanding class differences most people, poor or rich, if we follow the logic of the argument, will want to avoid existential anxiety. As Kinnvall and Mitzen note (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 241),

> Unlike fear, which resolves in the two "security" behaviors of fight or flight, anxiety is characterized by multifinality, admitting to a range of emotions, including excitement and anticipation, and a variety of behaviors, from compulsive repetition, to acting out, to paralysis, to entrepreneurship.

My contention is that from all these moods associated with anxiety, global problems are more likely to induce paralysis rather than entrepreneurship.

## 4. Science, Post Truth and Modes of Being

To reinforce my argument, I would like to introduce of the concept of post-truth, science and modes of being. My claim is not that we live in a post-truth era, where truth no longer exits, but that global interconnectedness invariably produces false expertise. One of that main aspects of a "post-truth" era is that the *institution* of science is put into question (Latour, 2012). Once the institution of science (its authority) is put into question, then one of the key pillars of modernity crumbles. The revolution of communications and algorithmic information produces misinformation, disinformation and confusion. As (McIntyre, 2018, p. 25) notes,

> The Oxford Dictionaries define "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." In this, they underline that the prefix "post" is meant to indicate not so much the idea that we are "past" truth in a temporal sense (as in "postwar") but in the sense that truth has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant.

The collapse of the *authority of science*, which had been replacing religion (Latour, 2012) in many places mostly in the Global North, leaves an open field for the emergence of "alternative facts" as Kellyanne Conway famously stated. The post-truth world is, I would argue, not only a question of political battles, but a question of our existence in the world, our fundamental believes, the paths one chooses for one's life. A vivid example of a post-truth world, is when former U.S. President Donald Trump, alleged that COVID-19 would disappear once the weather warmed up. Similarly, he suggested that injecting sanitizer on one's veins would destroy the corona virus—both assertions are false. But what about those who do not believe that they are false? Another example is "[w]hen South African President Thabo Mbeki claimed that antiretroviral drugs were part of a Western plot, and that garlic and lemon juice could be used to treat AIDS, over 300,000 people died." (McIntyre, 2020, p. 33).

The point I am trying to make is that "alternative facts" are not only a silly expression by a Trump surrogate, but it is also a series of practices that, for the most part, deny the severity of global problems. In many respects it becomes in "true" reality for many. The U.S. presidential elections are a good example. Millions of Americans believe that the 2020 Presidential elections believe that the election was stolen from Trump voters. An ontology of normalcy and a consolidated being has appeared, we could call it the Trumpian ontology. This is so because the normalcy created by Trump's "alternative facts" are the new normal for millions of Americans. In my explanation of anxiety, disinformation or misinformation are in most cases antidotes for anxiety and angst as they refuse to look at death in the eye, as it were. Once the institution of science is put into question, the arbiter of truth in the current version of modernity is lost. Thence, where are people looking for truth? I would argue that charismatic leaders, reli-

gious fanatics, conspiracy theories and/or "alternative facts" are prime candidates to supplant empirical facts. As McIntyre notes "willful ignorance," is a phenomenon of a post-truth world. Willful ignorance occurs "when we do not really know whether something is true, but we say it anyway, without bothering to take the time to find out whether our information is correct" (McIntyre, 2020: p. 29). We must consider that the context in which post-truth occurs is a world where social platforms, such as "X", "TikTok", "Facebook" and so on, present alternative facts as true and the tendency is for people to believe in the version of "truth" which lies furthest form anxiety.

Anxiety has also to do with the fact that once it emerges, one must do something to qualm it: by being respectful with the experts of, say, climate change. One must compost and be aware of the footprint one leaves behind and try to diminish it. I use compost as a simple example, but there are many more illustrations I could have used, like permaculture and so on and so forth. However, if one decides to belief that climate change is a hoax, we are freed from anxiety but by the same token, we put our heads under the sand and enter the world of paralysis. In this sense people engage with willful ignorance and pretend that global problems, which require radical changes in daily habits, like disengaging from consumerism, must take place. In many countries in the West, particularly in the United States, consumerism is a cultural characteristic of *being* "American." It is, therefore, easier to be willfully ignorant about the changes that one must engage in and pretend that there is no problem with the paradigm of unlimited economic growth.

In a post-truth world, the institution of science, as I have already pointed out, seems to be crumbling. The institution of science is evidently different from a scientist, a science paper or a book. It is the progressive articulation of new scientific discoveries based upon previous scientific knowledge—it is science's authority. Since at least the XVII century the institution of science has occupied a pivotal role in defining true from falsity. The institution of science derives its influence in the world as an authoritative institution; few, according to Latour & Wooglar (1976), know how science is made, but until recently that was part of its, say, allure. In *Laboratory Life*, Bruno Latour explains how science is constructed from a blank piece of paper to what we call scientific knowledge. The process as he shows is long and windy. One notable thing about science is the notion of scientific consensus, which s reinforces the *institution* of science.

When there is a scientific consensus, and it provides "useful," true and novel knowledge, society placed its trust on the institution of science. But in a post-truth world this is no longer the case. For example, there is a scientific consensus about climate change, and yet there are millions of people who either remain willfully ignorant or outright vocal about not believing that climate change is real. The notion that climate change is not real is also adopted by political figures with great authority, like Donald Trump, who, even though knows nothing about the actual models developed by scientists, proclaims that climate change is

a hoax (McIntyre, 2020). This places information the realm of fantasies not empirical, verifiable and generalizable facts. In other words, while most scientists agree that climate change is not only real, but caused by human activity, climate change deniers become even more vociferous about their denial. In a post-truth world, the realm of ideas, or more precisely, in the world of opinions, scientific consensuses are no more relevant than the opinions of conspiracy theorists, religious fanatics, or heads of state who willfully ignore it (like Trump). In this sense we are at a crossroads because while the institution of science disperses knowledge that may produce ontological anxiety, social platforms on the internet form opinions that stay away from that which causes ontological anxiety, such as denying climate change. Hence, the global population is not willing to change their lifestyles to help the environment—once again, the notion of misplaced normalcy prevails. As McIntyre states,

> Even though it seems important to illuminate their differences and understand that there are many ways one can fit underneath the post-truth umbrella, none of this should be acceptable to those who genuinely care about the notion of truth. But the tricky part is not to explain ignorance, lying, cynicism, indifference, political spin, or even delusion. We have lived with these for centuries. Rather, what seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself (McIntyre, 2020: pp. 32-33).

Upon reading this, one could argue that the post-truth world is more prone to anxiety than whatever preceded it. After all, if reality itself is questioned, in what will we anchor our day-to-day structures and sense of self? I would contend, however, that what has happened is that the postmodern attitude towards truth leaves that which we considered to be real, open to perspectivism. We must remember that the in the very sense of Dasein includes at its core the search for ontological security, not anxiety. But underneath it all, rests a sense of security in that all of this madness can be solved if we only undertake certain actions: donate money to grifters, false prophets and so on; buy and consume products that will change our luck—I could go on and on. Once one of these actions are taken, anxiety should be lifted. The postmodern world is not a blackhole in which the laws of physics cease to apply. It is a world where discourses compete for authority. In a sense this resembles the following passage by Giddens: "The maintaining of habits and routines is a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties, yet by that very token it is a tensionful phenomenon in and of itself" (Giddens, 1991: p. 49).

## 5. Understanding Global Networks

To fully understand the nature of a global response to a global problem, one needs to begin by analyzing in depth why a global problem is global. It is not enough to state that a global problem is a global problem because it affects most

of humanity. The way I propose to understand "globality" is through global networks. and space are crucial when attempting to understand the problem of anxiety, because changes in our sense of space and time, implies, the structures of human action. For instance, Giddens (1991: p. 2) states that,

> Besides its institutional reflexivity, modern social life is characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms—mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances.

What role do global networks have to do with this paper's argument? As Latour explains, the construction of scientific facts does not overnight, nor do they occur as a result of a scientist's deep knowledge about an issue. The "construction" of facts, to use Latour's terminology, is a lengthy process in which doing science a such occupies only a partial element in the construction of scientific facts. The time it takes to construct facts and making them available to readers is rather long and only a minimal part of the process is devoted to the use of the scientific method. By contrast global networks such as social media, online periodicals, and so on, have the advantage of presenting "alternative facts" in real time and without evidence.

In this sense, a large portion of the global population is a consumer of information which is more accessible and common sensical but comprised of "alternative facts." This reflects the problem of time and space (Giddens, 1986); for instance, algorithmic networks, has relativized space and time. People in the current epoch has opted for immediate information rather than waiting for scientists to claim knowledge over an issue. During COVID-19, this was clearly visible. The fastest version of a vaccine that science could deliver (bypassing necessary experiments) took one year. During that year the "anti-vaxers" had formed as a discernable, leaderless, movement—indeed, a *political* leaderless movement. There was a plethora of "arguments" about the dangers of the vaccine; and not only reasons not to take the vaccine were presented, but conspiracies about that was readily available algorithmically to those interested in the vaccine. One year, in comparison to algorithmic time, is very lengthy. In other words, before the vaccine was ready there were already all kinds of opinions, lies and remedies. In a similar vein, the issue of the vaccine, became a political fact. There were multiple instances in which political representatives had some type or "argument" especially in the United States. This political issue also extended to the international level. In a realist sense, adversaries developed their own vaccines: China, Russia and the United States each developed their own version of the vaccine. Moreover, a kind of proxy war formed as allies of the great powers chose which vaccine to use according to their political alliances.

In another sense, as Žižek (2020: p. 68) shows,

> There is a paradox at work here: the more our world is connected, the more

> a local disaster can trigger global fear and eventually a catastrophe. In the Spring of 2010, a dust cloud from a minor volcanic eruption in Iceland, a small disturbance in the complex mechanism of the life on the Earth, put to a standstill the aerial traffic over most of Europe. It was a sharp reminder of how, despite all its tremendous activity of transforming nature, humankind remains merely another of many living species on planet Earth."

There are important differences between previous pandemics and COVID-19. Some are common sensical: many occurred before hygiene and a centralized State had been developed (Foucault, 1993)—a centralized State capable of gathering its resources to combat a health emergency (at least during the Black plague and the Justinian plague) a crucial actor before the pandemic. Epidemiology did not exist or was quite rudimentary. One could find other common-sense explanations about the differences from one epoch to another. But I would like to focus in one fundamental difference: the appearance and declin of the *institution* of science. My aim is to look at the construction of facts by science and their significance as a product of the institution of science. I will follow the work of Latour and Woolgar (1976). Certain differences between multiple pandemics need not be analyzed at length; for instance, the fact that the Black Death was mainly a European phenomenon is due in part to the rudimentary forms of hygiene—an obvious fact. What I propose is that the COVID-19 pandemic should be analyzed as a modern phenomenon. The first aspect of modernity that I will consider is the status regarding the relational ontology of hard sciences.

Since the enlightment, the supposed age of reason, largely replaced religion and monarchies as the arbiter of truth. Science, thus, became an institution of truth making. The relationship with science and those outside the institution of science is complex and must be unpacked. Particularly in the West, but in other regions as well, the institution of science is not really challenged (of course there is the occasional guru who claims science is deeply flawed) and science, as I said, was the arbiter of truth in the post-enlightment world. This, however, is beginning to change as new technologies and electronic applications enter the stage. The irony of all of this is that science created the very technological innovations which are undermining it as an *institution*. One must remark that a scientist or a scientific discovery is not the same as the *institution* of science (Beck et al., 2003).

Much like Max Weber's description of authority (2019), the institution of science performed two roles: first, as the authority or arbiter of truth regarding scientific fact. Second the "advancement" of the human species through scientific discoveries about the human body has changed at a never-seen pace. Modernity is also defined by the notion of "progress"—a concept-practice at which science lies at its very center. The idea that humans lead a teleological road towards an ever-better future is largely a modern phenomenon. Progress is clearly a political concept; in hard sciences it performs a crucial role, giving a sense of

validity about the idea of teleological progress not only scientifically but politically (in the West). There is, however, a notion of progress contends that is not as welcoming as it seems. In the name of progress many acts of colonialism have taken place and non-Western countries have endured hardships stemming from the idea that their "backward" ways will eventually be replaced by civilized societies. The ethos of modernity is unique to our era. Pre-capitalist and pre-State societies did not, for instance, defined their time and space in terms of progress. The COVID-19 pandemic evolved within the conditions as Žižek puts it "the e coronavirus epidemic confronts us with two opposed figures that prevail in our daily lives: those, like medical staff and carers, who are overworked to the point of exhaustion, and those who have nothing to do since they are forcibly or voluntarily confined to their homes." (Žižek, 2020: p. 29).

## 6. Global Networks

There is another important aspect of modernity worth noting: its global networks worth at least one feature worth noting: "with globalisation and the increasing use of information technology to associate, some networks may be becoming increasingly detached from any specific locus." (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016).

To tackle the question of global networks, I will make use of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Hale (2016), for instance, notes that,

> An ANT study aims to "reassemble the social" (Latour, 2003), rather than deconstructing it; this is done by "follow[ing] the actors themselves" (Latour, 2003: p. 11). Tracing actor-networks involves investigating how those actor-networks came into being, or are represented as having come into being; how actors are enrolled into and mobilised in a network; how associations between actors constitute the network; how networks intersect with other networks and become part of extended actor-networks; how networks do or do not achieve durability, or at least temporary stability; and how networks change…

Moreover, Heinsch et al. (2020: p. 2) point that "inanimate entities such as technologies are understood to have agency and the potential to transform human interactions. Central to ANT is the principle of [ontological] symmetry, prioritizing neither humans nor nonhumans when tracing the source of an action." Even with this theoretical tool kit, as it were, I am prepared to posit that there is a staggering quantity of networks due to advances brought about by science. I, of course, cannot, and wish not, count networks numerically as if that were possible or useful. However, it is possible to say that global communication networks as a result of technological advancements, a cyberworld in which actor-networks coexist without any mediation, save for the technology itself, and most people in the world are in one way or another recruited into a network from time to time. Living in "the matrix," as it were, brings about some serious

conclusions about the fate of the institution of science. In the parallel world of cyber networks, we encounter numerous *beings*: some who consume information and some who produce it. In the cyber world there are all kinds of experts; there are conspiracies, there are hackers even, to dietary regimes. In the cyber world, however, is when we are least authentic, to use Heiddeger's terminology; the empirically based, slow-moving (comparatively speaking) work of scientists who themselves are part of a series of networks, which was actually successful in recruiting and process data, not following like that the politics of conflicts between China and the United States, etc.

Another relevant point about time-space is that "cyber-experts," don't need to take the time to deal with the ethical problems of science – whereas the issue of ethics is paramount for the institution of science. The institution of science as an actor-network is crumbling (I should stress that I am talking about the *institution of science*, not science itself) under its own weight, ironically and largely because of advancements in technology rooted in science (c.f. Beck et al., 2003. Never in the history of pandemics (excluding H1N1 or foot-mouth disease) has science faced the issue of cyber actor-networks, where the authority of science has been challenged and no good reasons has been provided explaining why. These "facts" developed in a post-truth world, produces we are given things like hydroxichloroquine as the antidote to COVID-19 (which spread like fire due to the sheer volume of actor-networks across the world. Likewise, suggestion that *injecting sanythizer* into one's veins is likely to kill the virus. There are several propositions of this nature in the Cyber World and so I pose that the pandemic was constructed in part by the world of "alternative facts."

## 7. The Construction of COVID-19

Moreover, the pandemic was constructed by the conjunction of policy makers (the State), the media, scientists and the public at large. One confusing aspect of States' actions worth mentioning, is that most States withdrew from the community of States to become quasi-autarkical, while at the same time, and for the most part (there were notable exemptions, like Sweden), adopted a series of draconian policies which made the being-in-the-pandemic a very singular experience for Dasein—an experience reigned by fear. Once again, all that Dasein expects is repetition and rejects its counterpart—impending death.

The construction of the pandemic was, moreover, a stark reminder of inequities around the world. In much of the Third World, the experience of the pandemic only worsened the already risky and unfair world of those at the bottom of racialized capitalism (see Virdee, 2019). Lockdowns were imposed. But a lockdown, in say, Switzerland, is not the same as one in Ecuador. In the latter, for example, close to 60% of its population are "employed" in the informal economy while the precariat depends on selling various goods such as candy on the streets. World-wide media, even the U.N. O.M.G. set out to present a picture which upended many of people's anchoring systems to the world. In fact, as Aho

(Aho, 2020: pp. 2-3; italicz in the original) notes,

> Insofar as Heidegger's early project attempts to give an account of the existential structures that make it possible for us "to be," that is, to meaningfully disclose or make sense of things, he simultaneously provides an opening to explore what happens when this capacity for sense-making is disrupted and we are unable to negotiate or find our way through the world. When this happens, we undergo a kind of ontological death where we are unable to-be because the web of homelike meanings that we draw on to sustain our identity (or being) has collapsed. During the pandemic, we were living the collapse of our day-to-day activities, which are important to sustain our ontological security, and this is altering the very structures that constitute our existence as *humans*.

## 8. Return to Normalcy?

Žižek (2020: pp. 65-66) shows that the pandemic entails five ontological stages:

> First, there was a denial (nothing serious is going on, some irresponsible individuals are just spreading panic); then, anger (usually in a racist or anti-state form: the Chinese are guilty, our state is not efficient…); next comes bargaining (OK, there are some victims, but it's less serious than SARS, and we can limit the damage…); if this doesn't work, depression arises (let's not kid ourselves, we are all doomed)… but how would will the final stage of acceptance look? It's a strange fact that this epidemic displays a feature common with the latest round of social protests in places like France and Hong Kong, they don't explode and then pass away, they persist, bringing permanent fear and fragility to our lives."

As I said at the beginning of this paper, I claim that ontological anxiety pushes people to seek normalcy (i.e., a world that is known to them). As Heidegger states (see above) the loss of our day-to-day activities, the monotonous world in which Dasein *is,* is "necessary otherwise what happens when Dasein's capacity for sense-making is disrupted—we are unable to negotiate or find our way through the world" (Ibid.) The opposite of this state is, "normalcy." The return is therefore the return to life. As Smagacz-Poziemska et al. (2024) note, there is no return to certainty after the pandemic. The fact that people don't see it makes no difference. We are in a new normalcy, not a pre-pandemic normalcy—a new normalcy. It would be useful to return to Heidegger at this point. "The idea is that in an anxiety-inducing rupture in the smooth functioning of one's life, the totality of meaningful relations within which one's live is lit up, along with one's singular place in it …; and in this new vision one is forced to confront how (or whether) *one will go on at all* (Shockey, 2016: p. 11; emphasis added). Here we can detect a scent of death. Death is of crucial importance when looking at our ontologies in Heideggerian terms. It is death what powers anxiety. According to

Shariatinia's (2015) reading of Heidegger, one can state that "From the perspective of Heidegger, man [sic] chooses to stay in this world, and human beings are meant to dwell. To dwell conveys the meaning of remaining safe and free from anxiety." Being free from anxiety is the ontological status which humans prefer to *be-in.* Moreover "[t]he modern life of man [sic] continues to deny in its real dimension, human death, and the so-called non-traditional and everyday existence … in the face of death, [they] chose *escape and evasion*." (Shariatinia, 2015: p. 96; emphasis added). The relationship between death and "being-in-the-world" is paramount. And it should remain clear that to *be* anxious is not the same as experiencing fear,

> Heidegger details anxiety in §40, drawing on his previous discussion of the mood of fear in §30, which he uses to bring out the basic structure all moods share and then to provide a contrast with anxiety. In fear, we fear *for* our life or some aspect of it, and we are afraid "in the face *of* [*wovor*]" something in the world that threatens us (a bear chasing us, losing our job, etc.). Our fear*ing,* thus, relates us to the world and entities in it in a particular way (as do most moods). Anxiety, by contrast, has no entity in the world—no thing or event—as its object, in the face of which one is anxious. (Shockey, 2016: p. 17).

Bringing these philosophical propositions to the argument of this paper, I claim that a pandemic fires up our anxiety about death. If contrasted to the fact that, "…Modern man had taken a position of denial in a deliberate manner about death." It should remain clear that the pandemic was not permeated by fear but by anxiety and death.

Moreover, there is another issue which we continue to face: The political problem. Political power has the capacity to install in society the need for a radical change in people's lives I am not only referring to individuals but the very structures that control the world of political economy. This, would-be change however, is stopped in its tracks by capitalism. The changes societies must endure include a revision of capitalism as the main economic-structural factor around the globe. In this sense neither lay people nor politicians are willing to threaten the ethos of progress (in the West), which is fuelled by capitalism and the paradigm of endless economic growth. In other words, my position is that societies are not ready for another global catastrophe because, as Žižek (Žižek, 2020: p. 63; emphasis added) puts it,

> One can discern the same five stages whenever a society is confronted with some traumatic break. Let's take the threat of ecological catastrophe: first, we tend to deny it (it's just paranoia, all that's happening are the usual oscillations in weather patterns); then comes anger (at big corporations which pollute our environment, at the government which ignores the dangers); this is followed by bargaining (if we recycle our waste, we can buy some time; also there are good sides to it: we can grow vegetables in Greenland,

ships will be able to transport goods from China to the US much faster on the new northern passage, new fertile land is becoming available in Siberia due to the melting of permafrost…), depression (it's too late, we're lost…); and, finally, acceptance—we are dealing with a serious threat, and *we'll have to change our entire way of life*!

## 9. Conclusion

This paper can be read as a warning sign and a calling for radical changes around the globe. At the same time, through various theoretical discussions, I have inferred that those changes are not to be seen, and, therefore, humanity is not ready to confront global catastrophes that are yet to come. I have also argued that the origin of this conundrum that the moderns face is, for instance, the double existence between "reality" and "cyber reality", this is the world of "alternative facts." Similarly, I have shown the damage done to the institution of science, not just the findings of this or that scientist. The institution of science has been both a pillar and an authority of modern societies since the enlightenment. But apart from the advances in science I have proposed that the problem is ultimately existential and political. Latour argues that the moderns are "victims of their own success" (Latour, 2003: p. 49). Finally, through Heidegger, I attempted to show the *dispositif* that unleashed the negation of problems, the attitude of complacency and the unwillingness to change one's habits. And, of course, politics, follows these desires by relationally place politics and the electorate to form a consensus about the continuity of progress—people prefer the illusion of progress rather than the alternative (radical changes). In other words, we face an existential threat stemming from the refusal of humans to build a different world to *be-in*.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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