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Receipts, radicalisation, reactionaries, and repentance: the digital dissensus, fandom, and the COVID-19 pandemic

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This essay aims to illustrate how the concept of “digital dissensus” (Penny Andrews in An Xiao Mina 2018) applies to the current state of politics and the public sphere, exacerbated by international “lockdowns” as a result of COVID-19. The digital dissensus describes the current period in politics, where the liberal consensus of the 1980s onwards has collapsed and the internet and social media have become forums for noisy debate and extremist voices. The essay argues that lockdowns have created the conditions for an *intensification* of already polarising fandoms in politics and activism online, as well as an intensification of the inequalities and exclusions within offline political activism. Coronavirus has made it difficult to escape the calls of the powerful to bring an end to “cancel culture” (Elliot Ackerman et al. 2020) returning to an imagined version of liberal hegemony and denying accountability to the marginalised.

It is not only difficult to live through a pandemic that requires us to work, socialise and engage in political organising predominantly online. We are also doing this during a period of profound and loud fragmentation and disagreement on many issues that do not neatly split into left and right, Leaver and Remainer, disabled and able-bodied, straight versus queer or any other easy divisions. At the same time, we are witnessing the radicalisation of previously innocuous celebrities, secondary trauma from attacks on minority communities to which we and the people we care about belong, fallout from racism, abuse within popular culture and politics fandom, and the digital revelation of problematic faves. Meanwhile we also have to struggle with our caring responsibilities to our families, our communities and ourselves. To belong to minority groups and be clinically vulnerable during COVID-19 is a trip, and to retreat to the comforts of fandom and physical spaces is no longer untroubled.

Digital dissensus and fandom

“For me, fandom is a really useful way of looking at the way people respond to politicians and political parties in a contemporary context --- not just because politicians are celebrities of sorts, but because the old ways of understanding politics have broken down. We had the post-war consensus, then the (neo)liberal consensus, and now we are somewhere else entirely --- what I call a digital dissensus, quick to jump to outrage and fragmented into echo chambers.” (Andrews in Mina 2018)

We should understand the digital dissensus as beginning with the economic crash of 2008, and its fallout still continues and intensifies online. While the concept of “interregnum”, a period where the liberal world order is in crisis, and its potential are not irrelevant to this discussion, the overuse of that particular quotation (Antonio Gramsci 1971) by the likes of Gramsci admirer Michael Gove makes the idea invoked too broad for this particular moment in history. Gramsci could not have predicted the sheer relentless nature of a device in your hand and solidarity in which it is so difficult to trust, or situations in which agency over the new being reborn seem so remote. The initial fragments of hegemonic ideologies --- big groups such as Somewheres and Anywheres (David Goodhart 2017) or Remainers and Leavers, Populists and Liberals, Internationalists and Nationalists, Corbynites and Blairites --- are fracturing further, falling out with each other and forming smaller groups with ever more distinct characteristics and concerns.

Fandom is not just for popular or even high culture, it can attach itself to any media property. What makes a fan part of a *fandom* rather than just the *fan base* (a group of non-networked people who enjoy the same cultural object on their own or with friends) is the sense of community and identity that comes from purposefully joining in. Social media acts as an intensifier, and the fans are the people you hear most often and associate most with a cultural or political property in the digital dissensus. The most hardcore fans and anti-fans share receipts

(screenshots of evidence, such as private messages or previous social media posts) in order to defend or discredit big names in their field and will cause social media “pile-ons” or even organised (via private group chats) “brigading” of individuals that are experienced as high-volume attacks. Many receipts have been shared during lockdown, as stans and anti-fans have the time to collect and disseminate the information, and new industries get their own #MeToo moments (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018) as creatives discover feminism or become bolder due to COVID-19 pausing or even ending their employment, and therefore immediate risk to their careers from speaking out is lessened. The reduction of social contact caused by COVID-19 has hastened and deepened these processes.

Communities and accountability

The deliberative space allowed by the shutdown of physical events and workplaces has created opportunities online for some communities to fracture and heal. Black Lives Matter (BLM) evolved from a moment to gaining mainstream acceptance as a widespread movement across the world, following the brutal murder of George Floyd. Awareness driven by BLM and the direct action it has inspired have forced accountability measures, promises of reparation payments, removal of offensive names and symbols such as statues, and driven profusive apologies from organisations and companies who have benefited from the subjugation of Black people. BLM pushed people onto the street to protest, declaring that structural racism is also a pandemic. These actions online and offline have also been met with violent resistance from white supremacists and professional controversialists, and repeated erroneous suggestions (Dhaval M. Dave et al. 2020) that BLM protests are or will be responsible for further COVID-19 outbreaks. Some Black people’s social media accounts and email addresses have become unusable due to the deluge of death threats, and other people of colour supporting BLM aims — such as Cambridge professor Priyamvada Gopal (Hannah Mirsky 2018; Joe Cook 2020) — have received large volumes of abuse characterised by anti-Black slurs and tropes as well as ad hominem

attacks. The online and offline activities cannot be separated, because they bleed into each other, and anti-Blackness is also a problem in non-white communities. Physical actions are reported by social media with photographs and videos and, often, provocative commentary. Online comments are reported in print newspapers and broadcast media, with editorialising that fails to recognise any difference between provocation and hate speech. Both arouse outrage in anti-racists to protest and embolden bigots to act digitally and physically.

BLM is not the only popular accountability movement gathering steam online during lockdown. The “This you meme,” the #speakingout hashtag outing abuse and predation in pro wrestling, Twitter threads describing experiences of women and queer people in comics and stand-up comedy and blog posts about academic predators have all been widely discussed and are starting to change policies and processes. But with no access to many of the offline spaces and activities that offer physical comfort, quiet and private time with friends or the ability to escape screens when people need to be online all day for work, communities have become fractious and at times socially distant --- virtually as well as physically. Physical protest actions have always excluded many disabled and chronically ill people, but the dangers of the pandemic have reduced access to this outlet further and online protest events, while frequently organised and promoted, do not receive the same attention. Online memes, however, can have more impact. The “This you?” meme calling out hypocrisy and asking for accountability surged in June 2020 as lockdown in some places began to ease. The format originated on Black Twitter (André Brock 2012) which — like a lot of “online culture” — tends to be Black, queer or both. Oppressed minorities develop their own language and practices, which are then appropriated and absorbed by majority groups. The meme quote tweets or screenshots a social media post and then provides “receipts” (evidence) that the person quoted is insincere or lying.

The digital dissensus has been exacerbated by polarised opinions of the handling of COVID-19 by right-wing governments in UK, Brazil, India, and the US, and tendency of leftists to “play cop” online on those from other factions and political traditions is an interesting tension

being surfaced by the digital dissensus: resistance and accountability versus policing of the behaviour and ability of individuals to change and develop. This type of thinking is not fully hegemonic in these communities but is also in conflict with BLM and socialist demands to defund the police and be more socially liberal and draws more criticisms from the centre and right in UK and US politics — especially those intent on stoking a culture war between “purity” and “liberty.” The tradition of pluralism can be difficult to sustain in online spaces, when groups feel under threat.

Communities develop and shatter around fandoms, favourites, hopes, and dreams. The pandemic made clap-worthy heroes and icons of UK’s NHS and care workers and 100-year-old charity fundraiser Captain Tom Moore. Key figures like the UK’s Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty became the subject of multiple fan groups on Facebook and works of productive fandom from sculptures to mugs. COVID-19 has made people more emotionally reactive, and thankful for those who seem to be helpful and trustworthy. This can be seen to have drawn more people into this kind of fandom and away from the cynicism often expressed towards these attachments. It is seen as acceptable to wear a t-shirt featuring an epidemiologist’s face, or cheer for Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon during her daily television broadcasts and strong female leadership — even if you disagree with her politics — because COVID-19 is all about expressing yourself with clapping, celebrating heroes and the newly-added “care” reaction on Facebook.

Politics fandom

Politics fandom, my area of expertise, is a way of understanding the attachment and forceful emotional response to politics and politicians, and politicised fandoms explain the power of networked fans in activism. The media’s --- and even academia’s --- gendered and disdainful response to fandom requires me to constantly defend the roles of emotion and rationality in politics and public life, and the harms caused by the stigma attached to fans and fandoms. Fans

are mocked by “sensible” commentators for their attachment to and reliance on the popular, be it their favourite football team, politician, campaign, musicians or other favoured cultural property. Those feelings are thought to cloud decision-making and be laughable at best, even as the UK’s Prime Minister is a publicly avowed fan of Winston Churchill, and the same commentators defend Victorian-era statues of slave traders or articulate a desire for the return of Obama or Tony Blair. The struggle for and against this culture, of consent and resistance (Stuart Hall 1998), is made more difficult by powerful voices in the media and politics popularising the stigma of doing so. Lockdown social media has been riddled with pained apologies and “repentance” messages from high status individuals who have been cancelled or feel wronged, often leading to the complainants being attacked for drawing attention to issues, and the reactionaries complaining that is they who are oppressed (Sara Ahmed 2015). Seen as causing us to spend too much time at home in our “bubbles,” lockdowns have encouraged solipsism and anger. It is exhausting. Where is the freedom in constantly being engaged in the struggle, in fighting for what is right, unable to opt out? What peace there must be in being able to discard feelings or not have them at all, confident that your own needs and desires and identity (political or otherwise) will be met and protected by power. Where the digital dissensus collides with all this is that recent research (James Johnson 2020) shows that the general public aren’t actually engaged with these attempts at culture war --- even the toppling of statues and battles over Winston Churchill’s legacy --- but the noisiest fragments are the ones that get most traction in the media. Predators and racists are outed as abusers, but many do not notice as communities split between those online too much as a way of coping, and those not at all able to engage. Women and minorities are given the opportunity to speak up in the new digital spaces created by COVID-19, but they are not necessarily *heard*.

Paying the price

Women, people of colour, disabled people and LGBTQ+ people are still doing the bulk of the emotional labour (Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2017) around and through the pandemic. They are running lockdown activities for fans and minority communities, managing people's feelings as fallout from accountability processes continue, volunteering for new roles as directors and diversity leads as organisations try to improve their conduct, taking on extra work in their paid jobs because they are parents, or taking on extra work because they are not parents and are expected to absorb all of the unsociable tasks and hours. They are also the most vulnerable to job cuts (International Labour Organization 2020), as they are more likely to work part-time or in precarious roles and short-term contracts that are not renewed, and most vulnerable to performance management initiatives, as the burden of managing life and work through COVID-19 takes its toll on their productivity.

Across society, politics and digital governance there are very real opportunities for lasting change, as moments deepen into movements and then more, but also the likelihood of lasting scars that may make the issues of the dissensus and the inequalities it exposes ultimately less visible and treatable. As with Brexit and the 2008 financial crash before it, much can be attributed by governments and the media to the traumas of the event itself and the economic depression that follows --- rather than individual and systemic problems that require solutions beyond waiting it out. This becomes more apparent as we lurch from one crisis to the next and the previous issues of greatest salience drop out of view: in June 2020, Brexit was only ranked by 6% of respondents as the most important issue to UK citizens (Ipsos MORI 2020), a drop of over 40% since January 2020. "Take care," work emails say. "Stay well." The replies for those who survive the pandemic may simply read "I'm still here."

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