GETTING LOST

Reflections on Psychopolitical Isolation and Withdrawal

Edited by Matthew H. Bowker and Amy Buzby

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Introduction

Matthew H. Bowker and Amy Buzby

We begin this short volume by recognizing that the coronavirus disease, hereafter referred to as "Covid" or "Covid-19," caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2, created a secondary epidemic of isolation around the world (Holt-Lunstad, 2020). Indeed, over the past two decades, numerous studies have investigated the psychological impact of forced social isolation due to epidemics like Covid, SARS, and MERS.[1] This book is focused not on physical distancing and literal isolation but on psychological isolation and withdrawal, a distinction worth elaborating. We draw on, perhaps paradoxically, psychologically robust conceptions of withdrawal and isolation, conceptions that, we believe, make it worth asking to what degree a pandemic such as Covid-19 creates conditions of abandonment of or detachment from psychic and political investment in the self and the shared world. In our view, withdrawal means something more than separation: Withdrawal and isolation work on the self, although they may very well not be conscious; and they involve internal psychic processes, whereas it is possible to be separated from others simply as a matter of fact and from the "outside," as it were. The question of this volume is to what degree we can understand the links between the Covid-19 crisis and psychopolitical isolation and withdrawal.

When we feel isolated or withdraw, something tends to arise in our place: be it a defense system, a constellation of symptoms, or the deeply repressed psychic material giving rise to either or both. Thus, it was not coincidental that, as millions died from Covid, and as millions more experienced severely "broken sociality" (Holdren, 2023) in the Covidian world of risk, quarantine, and/or lockdown, we also found ourselves witnessing explosions of extremism in popular discourse (Yousef, 2022), in large-scale border closures (Connor, 2020), in encroachments on women's and reproductive rights (Bergsten & Lee, 2023), in physical attacks on the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. (Duignan, 2023), in domestic and spousal violence (Mineo, 2022) and youth suicide (*Nationwide Children's*, 2023), in a war of aggression waged by Russia on Ukraine (Press ISW, 2023), and much more that has continued into our post-Covidian world.

We advance the term *psychopolitical isolation and withdrawal* in order to capture not only temporary periods of isolation but also detachments from reality and perverse attachments to unreality, visible on small and large scales. This partial or perverse facing of our self-experience and shared experience means that the Covidian era has altered our relationships to both the private and the public home, and with them, the meanings of citizenship, sociality, publicity, thinking, and being. Our hypothesis, to put it most plainly, is that Covid-19 damaged our relationship to reality, or at least tempts many of us to damage our own.

On this note, Jill Gentile (this volume) calls the disruptions surrounding Covid-19 "a series of weird, if not quite strange, contradictions" composing an eerie unreality that is only "getting weirder, less coherent, more disturbing" by the hour. Nate Holdren (2023), in an apt description of present-day *anomia*—the loss of shared reality and shared meaning—finds that our so-called "return to normal" has been one of extreme "political loneliness," derived from:

> the sense of a gulf in values or in understanding of some very important aspects of the world. Knowing that the return to normal means even more dying and life-altering suffering is terrible. Knowing that many people seem not to realize this, that people in officially respected positions seem to find this acceptable, that fellow travelers on the left don't treat this as a priority, that all feels isolating to a degree

> I find hard to overstate. What's happening, I think, is that there's no consensus on the reality we're living in: ideologically, the pandemic continues for some of us and is over for others, while, of course, it hasn't "actually" ended; it feels like living in a different world from other people, but still interacting.

If the end of the pandemic is more "ideological" than real, if it hasn't "actually" ended but its ending has been constructed for some, by some, a result of what Artie Vierkant and Beatrice Adler-Bolton (2022) refer to as "the sociological construction of the end of the pandemic as a crisis," then "the supposed 'return to normal,'" writes Holdren (2023), would seem to be "creating a lot more suffering, inequality, disablement, and death, which would not have happened but for the pseudo-return."

Put another way, an isolating yet destructive orientation to reality seems to be the only orientation possible, as the "ideology" of the new normal takes hold with seemingly inevitable necessity. On this front:

> The Biden administration has recently doubled down on its brutal, inhumane approach to the pandemic. Its main goal in doing so seems to be to continue to normalize processes of social murder. I think it's possible that the sense of isolation right now is serving as an ideology, in the sense that it's acting as a shaping force that helps further tilt the playing field politically to the advantage of the powers that be. This is not only, or even primarily, a matter of explicitly held beliefs, but rather is, to an important degree, how life in the pandemic is experienced for a lot of people—something that is, in effect, exuded spontaneously from pandemic life as organized by the prevailing institutions. (Holdren, 2023)

One way to think about this ideology of isolation and the withdrawal that issues from it is to refer to *depoliticization*: removing "political" factors such as power and capital from the way choices are construed and constructed. Indeed, one may say that any ideology involves us in the process of making it seem as if there were no choices at all, as if the route taken were the only one available, as if all that were real were inevitably so.

> Depoliticization is an attempt by government "to place at one remove the politically contested character of governing," in the words of the political scientist Peter Burnham. This might

> be called rule in denial: making decisions without seeming to make decisions, treating consequences as inevitable, and trying to displace authority elsewhere so as to avoid accountability for what occurs. (Holdren, 2022)

Because the complexity of modern governance "requires extensive technical expertise to inform policy and guide the administrative state," contemporary nation states may appear to be run apolitically, leaving citizens either to withdraw or to become "cynical." In the face of Covid,

> heavy and increasing reliance on experts … further estranges average citizens from the process of governance and thins out the normative steering of civil society. Officials, fixating on performance, generally misunderstand the problem and try to assert ever more technocratic control … This process cycles, inducing lurches toward two possible reactions among citizens: quiescent withdrawal into private life—despair that cedes the field to technocrats, leaving the public sphere depleted, or corrosive cynicism, leading to support for populists who deny the need for expertise entirely. (Neblo & Wallace, 2021, pp. 1524–1525)

Not surprisingly, the field in which our experts must be expert is the field of "crisis" or "crisis management." Crises can hardly be regarded as philosopher Giorgio Agamben's "states of exception" (2005)—we also take issue with Agamben's conspiracy-theory-laden response to the pandemic—for they are now more commonly found to be enduring existential conditions, for example, "the crisis of post-modernity," "the crisis of late capitalism," even the present "polycrisis" (Abdelrahman, 2022, p. 1152).

> Crisis has become part of an ever-expanding lexical chain that weaves concepts such as disaster, emergency, risk, vulnerability and resilience which, in turn, interact to create an analytical lens through which we are expected to understand the world … By the end of the 20th century, crisis discourse had given rise to a global industry of crisis management complete with research centres, training courses, global reports, academic publications and a class of crisis management experts, all tasked with helping policy makers fix a world constantly "on the brink." (ibid., p. 1152)

Perhaps this reification of *crisis* is one reason individual citizens and citizen-groups have largely withdrawn from the task of defining the current reality. That is, it has been left to powerful elites to determine Covid's starting- and ending-points, its scope, demands, conditions, viable responses, and reasonable solutions.

> Power during a crisis, exercised by the state or capital, does not manifest itself only in the capacity to respond to and manage its effects, but in the ability to identify what constitutes a crisis in the first place and indeed when a crisis needs to be declared as such. (ibid., p. 1155)

As Doris Lessing reminds us, social power in a time of crisis is eminently visible when dissenting attitudes are met with "immediate ostracism" (1987, p. 17). Those of us who study groups are well aware that "we can stand in a room full of dear friends, knowing that nine-tenths of them, if the pack demands it, will become our enemies … This is an absolutely automatic process; nearly everyone in such situations behaves automatically" (ibid., p. 18).

The automaticity of this exercise of power in the Covidian era, then, is demobilizing and deactivating in several senses. First, Covid's presence was enough to engender widespread feelings of powerlessness and helplessness (Biddlestone et al., 2020). When one adds to this the threat of social ostracism, a Tocquevillian picture of psychic denigration in "democratic" societies emerges (see Bowker, 2014). "The public," writes de Tocqueville, "has a singular power … the very idea of which aristocratic nations could not conceive. It does not persuade of its beliefs, it imposes them and makes them penetrate souls by a sort of immense pressure of the minds of all on the intellect of each" (2000, p. 409). The power of the majority, having condemned most democratic citizens to unwitting conformism, has held sway over Covidian outlooks and responses as well, including society's capacity to facilitate both being and being alone in the midst of the current "crisis" (see Gerard, this volume). Instead, Gerard argues that we have increasingly reverted to the kinds of activities that express *not* being a self, what D. W. Winnicott calls "the doing that arises out of [not] being … a whole life … built on the pattern of reacting to stimuli" (1986, p. 39).

The isolation- and withdrawal-inducing potential of Covidian politics is highlighted by Gkinopoulos and Galanaki in their study

(this volume) of Covidian ostracism, which examines (a) individual- and personality-based risk factors, (b) deprivation of social touch, disruption of empathy, and social stigmatization in interpersonal relations, and (c) disruption of social identity, social stigmatization, and the rise in prejudiced, discriminatory, and xenophobic tendencies within groups. These authors propose an interplay among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup dimensions of identity, that is, a multilevel conceptualization of ostracism(s) during the Covidian era. They contend that personal identity-commitment and identification with social groups have similar roots, based on the individual's need to formulate meaningful connections to the world and, thus, to cope with as well as to prevent ostracism, which is experienced, in *longue durée*, as "a form of social death."

Considered another way, Covidian experience implicates, even defines, the other. A Lacanian might say that Covidian experience invites us to use others to fill in the hole or gap in the big Other, which represents all we don't know about the pandemic and how it will affect us. In this volume, non-Lacanian clinical psychologist Dan Livney examines, among other things, questions concerning our relationships with others under Covidian regulation: links between fantasies about the vaccination needle and "the way we each get under one another's skins, living as we do in overlapping social groupings." In locked-down households, where prevailing forces previously allowed for critical spaces between household members, now twisted views of the other lessen or foreclose on such possibilities. Livney equates Covid to

> a global Rorschach test, an invisible virus and a panoply of associations related to it. Some respond to quarantine with a kind of retreat into a space of withdrawal and fear of the other, as though the other is an embodiment of the virus to be loathed; or perhaps the savior figure who won't save.

In broad terms, Livney finds that our unconscious minds process the reality of an intangible virus by calling up *relational* images and fantasies. That is: images and scenarios about the relationship between ourselves and real or fantasied others. "If we are bound to respond with fear," he notes,

> we may withdraw. If with guilt, we may ruminate, or draw closer to those we have previously avoided. And if we respond to fear with denial

> and anger, then we go on the offensive—but not against the virus, but against those who become representatives of our oppression.

What he observes is that while some of his patients have found in Covid an opportunity to draw closer in an effort to find what safety and warmth there can be in a separated time, others have reacted with an aggression that is "essentially misplaced" because "rather than fighting the real threat, which is the virus, we make use of the relational mind to find threats in the personhood of other people."

In his chapter, "From anomia to stasis," Matthew H. Bowker writes of the complex relationship between civil strife and public health crises, concluding that both involve what John Steiner (1993, p. 101) famously called "psychic retreats," unfortunate psychopolitical stances into which we are drawn because we face "the awful dilemma" of living out a "reality which appears to be unbearable and is yet necessary for survival."

> The retreat … serves as an area of the mind where reality does not have to be faced, where phantasy and omnipotence can exist unchecked and where anything is permitted. This feature is often what makes the retreat so attractive to the patient and commonly involves the use of perverse or psychotic mechanisms.

Bowker's chapter explores the link between retreats and what are known as "psychic gangs," which helps us better understand the relationship between the denial of reality in one sphere of life, public health, and the creation and empowerment of extreme, perverse, and gang-like (psychic and political) organizations in other spheres of life, such as national and international politics.

As mentioned above, Nathan Gerard uses the example of D. W. Winnicott to discuss the problem of psychic absence in the Covidian era. For Winnicott, when the early home environment was "good-enough," one faced the apparent paradox that later delinquency expressed a hope and a wish to return to the providing and safeguarding home that preceded it. This hope was linked to the possibility (offered by a benign and reliable environment) of finding one's true self; a self strong enough to face "getting lost" by itself or in itself. The argument of Gerard's chapter is that the social environment preceding and informing the pandemic had deteriorated to such an extent that this healthy dynamic of hide-and-seek became increasingly difficult if not impossible. Gerard here alludes

to solitude as a psychopolitical resource: that there is health involved in the possibility of getting lost, separated without deprivation, insulation, or psychopolitical withdrawal. Already degraded by decades of neoliberal philosophy and practice, the survival of that robust self was threatened again by the Covid pandemic.

In "Social-theoretical distancing: Liberatory ambitions in Covidian times," Elliott Schwebach asks what losses, or potential losses, befall socio-political theorizing as a result of Covid-19 and the popular discourse that surrounds it. Specifically, his chapter interrogates the statist/anti-statist binarism that has come to characterize debates about the relationship between pandemic response and freedom, suggesting that this hardline and reductionist binarism may too easily foreclose theoretical aspirations for liberation from state oppression and control. In response, Schwebach offers a contextualized approach that situates both stateless futures and contemporary measures for preventing catastrophic levels of infection and mortality within a historicized psychopolitical liberation framework. Toward this end, he looks to models provided by Herbert Marcuse and Frantz Fanon and evaluates which may serve as a better guide for the upkeep of liberatory ambitions in Covidian times, ultimately arguing that liberatory futures would be more dependably conceived under a Fanonian framework, which envisions a non-teleological and anti-deterministic fostering of international democratic consciousness, through which colonial injustices can be rectified and inegalitarian modes of organization and behavior transformed, and by which we imagine not an eradication of trauma or pain but the creation of a world in which care and healing for natural causes of suffering (those beyond human control) are universally possible.

Jack Fong draws our attention to Covid's breaching of the "zeitgeist of what we have mystified about democracy and freedoms." In its place, a colonized world of "democracy deserts" has revealed itself, where right-wing populists' recent successes are at least partly attributable to elites' "loss of control of the institutions that have traditionally saved people from their most undemocratic impulses. When people are left to make political decisions on their own they drift toward the simple solutions … a deadly mix of xenophobia, racism and authoritarianism" (Shenkman, 2019). The romance surrounding American democracy and freedom, finds Fong, has been detrimental to our understanding of conditions on the ground, especially during periods of social crisis

where repressive, anti-democratic forces appear between and beyond major election cycles. That is, misinformation, extremism, and moral supremacism have sprung up in America's democracy deserts.

Fong then pursues a complex line of argument rooted in the psychic requirements for effective and mature participation in civil life: separation and relation. *Both* are needed: the capacity for solitude (without which life would mean infinite exploitation by others) and the capacity to relate to the other as a separate subject, without which anger, fear, and violence against the other are unbounded. American conservatives of the anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination, anti-mask variety, Fong argues,

> have failed to nurture their solitude, experiencing instead what Bowker termed "pseudo-solitude," a form of aloneness that fails to develop an overcoming self, and … a form of aloneness where deformed political misinformation overwhelms the self to the extent that "an error" surfaces in "imagining the ethical relationship between the individual subject and the group".

Fong argues that pseudo-solitude results in a misguided imagination of freedom, such that upon entering the public sphere, American conservatives "begin their fanatical proselytization of a deformed freedom that is fascistic and totalitarian, processes that establish socially limiting conditions for the collective."

Amy Buzby sketches a nascent system of political thought she argues is inherent in both the written works and the therapeutic praxis of D. W. Winnicott. Buzby connects Winnicott's central conceptions of holding, maturational progress toward constructive autonomy (which can also be called the true/false self paradigm), play, and the muddle in individual development and family dynamics to broader, but equally needful, patterns in associational life. Buzby asserts that societies begin to fail in psychosocial and political terms if the group holding environment, capacity to tolerate individual autonomy, ability to engage in shared forms of play in the public sphere, and maintenance of reality testing (especially in troubled times) is compromised. Buzby contends that Covid-19 is a particularly telling and severe shock to associational life, and thus buckled our shared capacity to maintain these Winnicottian markers of healthy group life. Covid-19, in other

words, caused a group regression and the need for something to fill the gap left when shared holding networks fail. Conspiracy theory and rising authoritarianism problematically fill this void. Using Covid-19 as her central case study, Buzby thereby highlights the existential threat that the failure of the pre-political, Winnicottian threads in our shared life poses.

In "Anxiety, psychic regression, and the demise of the civic self," Michael Thompson argues that modern anxieties pervade our associational life as a "fundamental dynamic eroding democratic consciousness, culture, and institutions." These anxieties thus lead to both the degradation of democratic norms and the vitiation of the "civic self" that must undergird the autonomous, constructive citizen's relationship to the state, their fellow citizens, and the broader democratic culture of the public sphere. Thompson notes that the shared experience of living under advanced industrial capital stresses the ego strength of the subject as a baseline, and engenders a baseline of tension and uncertainty that produce tremendous anxiety in the average subject. The Covidian age, however, has pushed us far beyond this already problematic position, and "we have come to an inflection point where the cumulative effects of commodification, technicization, instrumentality, and its effects of alienation and reification on modern consciousness have undermined a culture capable of articulating civic selves." Restoring and vivifying civic life, Thompson urges, is thus an urgent necessity for contemporary sociopolitical life, and fuller attention to contemporary psychosocial pathologies and mechanisms for managing the anxieties overwhelmingly inherent in contemporary life are indispensable for any defense of democratic norms and values.

Finally, Jill Gentile's polemical chapter articulates the call, addressed particularly to psychoanalysts, to forge a new democratic reality in the face of the "weird" and the "strange," precarity and tumult. If widespread calls for anticapitalist, anti-racist collective renewal have issued from an encounter with previously repressed, even "unthinkable," ancestral racialized legacies, her essay challenges psychoanalysis to reckon with its validity as a so-called emancipatory, healing praxis and to inscribe in its theory a new "position," a radical democratic imaginary constituted by the action of revolt, the disruption of "the plague of the incestuous familiar," a democratizing,

deconstructive praxis, and the vitalizing, unruly motions of desire and its erotic aims.

Collectively, these chapters work to exposit both the depth of the psychosocial peril faced by contemporary societies and the increasingly atomized individuals who comprise them, and how the collective experience of Covid-19 not only further strained extant psychodynamic fault-lines at work in modernity, but created new and deeply troubling issues that problematize the maintenance of citizenship, democracy, and the constructive potential of associational life. We hope that these chapters will not only inspire further thinking and work on these vital topics, but also serve as a klaxon signaling an immediate, existential threat to psychosocial and political life.

Note

1. Kato et al., (2020, p. 506) have turned to a recently popularized construct, *hikikomori*, to further understand this phenomenon. They argue, for example, that not only medical/epidemiological contingencies but "traumatic events, such as economic, social, or political crisis, can cause even previously healthy people to avoid social contact and enter a *hikikomori* state with psychiatric conditions." *Hikikomori* derives from the Japanese words *hiku*, or pulling in, and *komoru*, or retiring. It means, literally, "pulling away and being confined" (Hairston, 2010, p. 311; Lee, 2009, p. 128). The construct, which describes a period of social isolation lasting from several months to several years, has gained widespread notoriety in Japan and worldwide since the year 2000 (see also Bowker, 2022).

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