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Democratic Politics in Virulent Times: Three Vital Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article offers three lessons for a post-pandemic democratic politics. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the deep ontological entanglements of human and non-human systems: A submicroscopic agent jumping from an animal to a human host impacts human societies across the world. In the process, the virus has revealed a second lesson: Public responses to the pandemic have exacerbated already existing inequalities and fueled anti-democratic desires for national and individual fortification. In a world where political emergencies like the pandemic are becoming more prevalent due to climatic and ecological destabilizations, there is an urgent need to promote new countervailing democratic forces. Together, these two insights motivate a third lesson: In order to address the ecological and political challenges of the so-called Anthropocene, democratic activism and political organizing must itself become more like the virus, more viral. Inspired by swarming behaviour in complex systems, a democratic politics of transformative change must give up illusions of simple solutions and central control, and instead rely on dispersed multi-sited actions happening at many scales at once, while working towards the improbable but necessary goal that these actions might, eventually, come together and bring about change at a planetary scale.

Keywords: COVID-19, democracy, emergency politics, biopolitics, fortification, new materialism

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals at least three vital lessons for our thinking about democratic politics. First, it makes us feel, in a material way, what theorists of new materialism have been saying for a long
time: That the active and sometimes disruptive forces of non-human entities matter for politics. In the
case of the pandemic, this insight has been revealed in a way that highlights what William Connolly has
called the ‘fragility of things’, that is the fact that even small disturbances in one force-field – such as the
biological jump of a zoonotic disease from a bat to a human carrier – can create ripple effects throughout
many other force-fields, including global socio-economic relations. The pandemic urges us, therefore, to
think more carefully about the fragile and often destructive ecologies and human-nonhuman
entanglements of late capitalism. The pandemic is, in other words, best viewed as a warning sign of what
is to come, rather than an extraordinary and temporary crisis. We call this the ontological lesson.

Moreover, the pandemic has demonstrated that nationally anchored liberal democracies are
extremely vulnerable to external dangers, and in ways that put pressure on democracy itself. In many
countries -- including in Denmark where we, the authors, live -- governments have responded to the
pandemic by shoring up national borders and centralizing political decision-making, moving it even
further away from an already frustrated public. Such tendencies are particularly worrying in light of the
first lesson. With the ongoing climatic and ecological crises of the Anthropocene, we are entering a more
unstable and disaster-ridden future where the pandemic is but one of a range of natural-but-not-entirely-
natural disasters. Thus, the external triggers of anti-democratic pressures are not going away. In fact, they
will likely multiply as external “dangers” are soon also going to include millions of climate refugees, and
it is not difficult to imagine how race and epidemiology might be coupled then, citing a history of racist
partnerships between health science and xenophobic policies. There is an urgent need, therefore, to push
for more, not less democratic politics and to extend existing networks of solidarity beyond nation-borders
before new crises arise. That is the second lesson. We call this the democratic lesson.

But how might this political change come about? It is not simply a matter of bolstering current
democratic regimes, as some liberals argue, but about initiating the far-reaching cultural, social and
ecological transformations of our societies needed to ward off even the worst consequences of the
ongoing climate and ecological crises. Here too, we might learn something from the COVID-19
pandemic. Or even from the virus itself. In a playful register, we want to suggest that democratic activism
needs to become more like the virus, more viral. Relying on contagious actions and affects, citizens and
theorists alike should engage in what William Connolly has called a politics of swarming, where
experimentation and mutation, transmission and contagation, happen in decentralized networks rather than
societal centers. The hope being that, not unlike the virus, a democratic politics of green transnational
solidarity might spread faster and wider than we could have previously imagined. We call this the
aspirational lesson.

In what follows, we address each of these three lessons in turn.
The Ontological Lesson: COVID-19 and the Ecological Fragility of Things

The beginning of 2020 saw the first confirmed cases of humans infected with SARS-CoV-2, now commonly known as COVID-19 or simply the coronavirus. Starting in Wuhan, China, where the first cases of pneumonia-like symptoms were registered, the virus quickly spread across the globe in the following months, making first China, then Northern Italy, and later the rest of the world the breeding ground for a new world-wide pandemic. Early reports from the Chinese authorities suggested that an infected bat soup at a market in Wuhan might have been the likely ground zero, but the epidemiological origins of the new coronavirus variant remain up for debate.1 Regardless of its origins, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly revealed several important elements of our contemporary human societies, which had hitherto been more difficult to ascertain. It worked as a sort of contrast agent.

The sudden arrival of the new coronavirus showed humans that we live in a world inhabited by many other ecological agents, not all of which are favorable to human conditions of life. Not unlike natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, or a sudden electrical blackout, the tiny non-human agent of zoonotic virus facilitated a sudden disruption of human societies across the globe, reminding us of what political theorist Jane Bennett has called the active ‘thing-power’ inherent to all matter (Bennett 2010a; 2010b). “Nature”, to use the broadest possible term, is not a stable background upon which human activities unfold, but the very fabric humans themselves are made of, imbricated with, and unfolding through. The world is inhabited by multiple other sources of agency and power that repeatedly impinge upon human plans and intentionalities. The coronavirus is but one example.

In Vibrant Matter, Bennett uses the case of the Northeast American blackout in 2003 to illustrate how the forces of nonhuman things come to matter in disruptive ways (Bennett 2010b, 24ff.). One of the interesting aspects, which is also relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, is the way in which complex assemblages of human and nonhuman agencies, and their creative and emergent capacities, make it difficult to pinpoint a single, original source of agency behind an event like an electrical grid breakdown. To this day, investigators have been unable to pinpoint the exact cause of the blackout in 2003. Part of the reason, according to Bennett, is that there is no simple explanation; the blackout is best understood as an emergent outcome of a complex assemblages of human and nonhuman agencies whose forces exceed that of each of the actants alone. The blackout was, in Bennett’s words, the “end point of a cascade” of both human and nonhuman forces, including voltage collapse, power loops, and decades of human deregulation of grid usage (Bennett 2010b, 25). Likewise, instead of trying to single out one primary source of origin when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, we might think of it instead as the emergent outcome of a diverse constellation of human and nonhuman forces that include but are not limited to:

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1 There are still ongoing investigations into the origins of this new virus variant and its ‘patient zero’. See for example (Duarte 2020).
contingent epidemiological mutations happening at a submicroscopic level, habitat losses driven by agricultural activities that drive humans and nonhumans in to new relations, the accelerated supply chains of global capitalism, the large-scale reshuffling of multiple ecosystems due to global warming, and the hollowed out public institutions of many existing liberal democracies. The global pandemic is, in other words, a complex emergent, entangled, and more-than-human event.

These examples, a Northeast blackout and the global pandemic, are not idiosyncratic. They reveal a more general ontological condition of politics today: Human activities unfold in their emergent relations with many other agents, who interact with and react to what we do, and vice versa. A concept sometimes used to highlight this entanglement of human and nonhuman forces is that of the “Anthropocene”, a term originating in the natural sciences suggesting that the planet has entered a new geological epoch in which human actions and the trajectories of earthly ecosystems have been linked to a hitherto unprecedented scale (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2006; Steffen et al. 2011). In the current epoch of the Holocene, which has lasted for almost 12,000 years since the last Interglacial Period, natural environments on earth have been characterized by a high degree of ecological stability compared to the rest of the earth’s 4.5 billion year history, and entirely unprecedented in the few hundred thousand years of human existence. As a result, many human beings are accustomed to a world of ongoing ecological stability. In the Holocene, communities of humans might deplete the nutrients in a specific plot of land, clear cut the local forest, or hunt their prey to the brink of extinction. But as long as these activities eventually receded, natural ecosystems would bounce back - a phenomenon the multispecies anthropologist Anna Tsing calls ‘holocene resurgence’ (Tsing 2017).

In the Anthropocene, however, this dynamic is changing. Due to the scale and speed of human activities and the climatic and ecological crises that follow in their wake, the resurgent abilities of many natural ecosystems have been systematically undercut. Instead, ecosystems are pushed so far beyond their previous equilibriums that natural scientists have started talking about the risk of enabling new climatic trajectories that would result in a scenario they call ‘Hothouse Earth’, denoting a place radically less habitable to human as well as many other forms of life (Steffen et al. 2018). In the Holocene, “nature” might have appeared like an environmental background upon which human activities unfold, but today, in the Anthropocene, we are beginning to realize, anew, that this was never the case. The earth speaks back, as the French philosopher Bruno Latour likes to remind us (Latour 2017). It is in this light that the COVID-19 pandemic is not a fleeting, extraordinary event, but rather a symptom of our times. Due to the way humans interact with, and recurrently destroy, ecosystems and animal habitats, it was always a matter of time before the next pandemic hit (WHO 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals, in other words, what political theorist William Connolly has called ‘the fragility of things’: That we live in a “cosmos composed of innumerable, interacting temporal force fields with varying degrees of self-organizational capacity,” which are “vulnerable to periodic bouts
of radical disequilibrium” (Connolly 2013, 8, 27). This fragility is intensified, today, by dynamics of neoliberalism and late capitalism, both because of the direct effects of unstoppable drilling and fracking technologies that trigger new ecological disasters, the indirect effects of anthropogenic greenhouse gases causing global warming, and the gradual erosion of public capacities for collective decision-making and crisis-response. As Connolly writes, this increased fragility also resides in the “periodic flu virus jumps from birds and pigs to human beings in a world in which the overuse of antibiotics makes it more difficult to manage a global epidemic” and where intensified agricultural and farming practices themselves make the spread of new pathogens more likely (Connolly 2013, 33).

Part of the challenge today, therefore, both as political theorists and democratic citizens, is to become more sensitive to the myriad more-than-human forces around us, and our own entanglement with and intensifications of the fragility of all the ecosystems upon which we depend. We will have to recognize that politics and ecology are not as separate as we might have thought, but two deeply entangled forcefields that routinely impinge upon each other. Therefore,

To come to terms with looping relations between capitalist production, carbon and methane emissions, state policy, consumption practices, glacier movements, and climate change sets the stage to link political economy regularly to the behavior of nonhuman force fields. (Connolly 2013, 28–29)

Due to the ongoing activities of human beings in the Anthropocene, we can expect more, not less, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic in the futures to come. In fact, many of the consequences of the current ecological and climatic crises are already felt around the world today. Thus, the question becomes not only how to prevent more crises from arising, which is certainly important, but also how to respond to those crises, and how to work to bolster our democratic institutions in the interim. Maybe, and hopefully, the COVID-19 pandemic can work as a warning sign that will help motivate these debates.

Neoliberalism and global capitalism not only make crises more likely, they also make our political communities more susceptible to them: Global supply chains allow for a pandemic to spread in new and speeded up ways, while hollowed out public institutions and political cultures shaped by growing inequalities and political divisions make public responses less efficient. Therefore, in addition to cultivating new sensibilities for the ways nonhuman agencies and systems speak back to, and affect human communities, we must (re-)build public and political capacities for responding to these crisis that will inevitably arise, as well as create more democratic and solidaric institutions less susceptible to them in the first place. It is these issues, and the role of democratic politics in times of crises like a global pandemic, we now turn to.
The Democratic Lesson: Affirmative Biopolitics and the Desire for Fortification

The COVID-19 pandemic is not simply an extraordinary event, but also a symptom of the current moment. In his recent book about the politics of the pandemic, *The Revenge of the Real*, sociologist Benjamin Bratton argues along these lines that “instead of naming this moment a “state of exception,” we should see it more as revealing pre-existing conditions.” (Bratton 2021, 8). The pandemic worked as a sort of democratic stress-test that has “revealed dire inadequacies not just in state response, but in the political cultures that credentialize, shape, and reflect them.” (Bratton 2021, 2). Among the main culprits, for Bratton, is the surge of populist politics which has risen across many societies in recent years, which made people lose sight of the “reality” of the virus, which has “crashed through comforting illusions and ideologies.” (Bratton 2021, 1).

In response, Bratton argues in favor of a ‘new realist form of planetary politics’ as an “antidote to the populist incoherency of recent years” (Bratton 2021, 8-9). This realist planetary politics is one that emphasizes the importance of scientific knowledge, technological innovations, and a strong political leadership (Bratton 2021, 30-32). Bratton’s vision of a post-pandemic politics shares much with the ontological lessons we have proposed: it is a politics built on the entanglement of human and nonhuman life, it aspires to produce complex forms of knowledge about the biological and social world that reflect these entanglements, and it sees in failed responses to the pandemic important lessons to be learned in confronting climate change. Like Connolly, Bratton conveys the importance of the planetary scale, arguing against the sufficiency of nation-states, particularly those under right-wing populist movements and regimes. Moreover, the planetary differs from the global, with the latter focusing too exclusively on economic systems and not on ecological metabolisms. The pandemic has disclosed the effects of decades of neoliberal policy, gutted social systems, and the reign of sovereign individualism. Collective action, much less a coordinated political response sufficient to address planetary concerns, is nearly unthinkable under these conditions.

While we agree in part with Bratton’s critical diagnosis of existing political regimes, we do however remain wary of both the epistemological appeal to what seems like a relatively naive distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘ideology’, and the corollary insistence on a rationalist techno-optimism as the solution to the current crisis. Instead, as we argue in the remainder of this article, we believe that the complex and entangled political and ecological crises of the Anthropocene requires a much more humble,

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2For an example of how this realism leads to an unconvincing take on other scholarship, here is what Bratton writes about Foucault-inspired research: “Reality recedes further and further away as the insistence that it is all discourse extends all the way down. It is here that the orthodox biopolitical critique is, unfortunately, aligned with the populist Right.” And: “At their extremes, both valorize political performativity over scientific empiricism, both eschew the very notion of objectivity, and both are crippled by self-paralyzing magical thinking” (38).
perhaps even anarchic, approach to democratic politics.₃ This may still amount to what Bratton calls a “positive and planetary-scale biopolitics” (Bratton 2021, 32), a rethinking of the category of life and its relation to governance and power, but it is one that dispels illusions of central control and simple solutions. Part of what is missing in Bratton’s analysis is a theory of democracy and democratic change. Even if Bratton’s arguments in favor of a rationalist techno-politics were entirely convincing, he offers little advice as to how that politics might manifest itself in today’s landscape of democratic politics. It remains pitched at the level of academic argument with little guidance for democratic practice.

In the third and final section of this article, we turn to the more affirmative question: What kind of democratic politics are needed today, in response to the pandemic, and more generally to the crises of the Anthropocene? Drawing on new social movements and green initiatives taking place on the ground today, we argue in favor of a democratic politics that recognizes the deep uncertainty of planetary politics in the Anthropocene and insists on acting in multiple places and at multiple scales at once in the radical, and perhaps naive hope, that those disconnected efforts might, eventually, come to resonate and bring about transformative change at a planetary scale. But first, in the next section, we aim to show that the current pandemic reveals not only a political crisis at the level of epistemology driven by a surge in populist movements, as suggested by Bratton, but a much more fundamental series of flaws and inequalities in current liberal democracies.

The Pandemic Response: Democratic Distrust and Emergency Politics

In a recent article in the Atlantic, the sociologist Zeynep Tufecki, who has become a prominent public academic and commentator during the pandemic, argues that the American response to COVID-19 has failed on several fronts (Tufekci 2021). Among the central problems “has been the mistrust and paternalism that some public-health agencies and experts have exhibited toward the public.” Instead of communicating the (complex) mechanisms of viral transmissions, which could have “helped empower people to make informed calculations about risk in different settings”, the public messaging focused on a set of easily communicable rules: Keep ‘x’ amount of distance and avoid close contact for more than ‘x’ minutes. These rules offered, in turn, a “false sense of precision” and left little room for people to come up with meaningful responses adjusted to their local settings.₄

Moreover, the public response to the pandemic has, Tufecki argues, been characterized by a “poor balance between knowledge, risk, certainty, and action” (Tufekci 2021). Part of the challenge is that science, whether epidemiology or climate science, often moves slower than the need for public

₃ Due to the scope and space restraints of this paper, we won’t be able to lay out a fully fledged account of our understanding of democracy here. However, for a more comprehensive take on what a ’new materialist’ theory of democracy might look like, see Ejsing (2021).

₄ For more on this point, see also (Karan 2021).
action. Emergencies demand that political decisions be made even amidst great uncertainty, which raises a more general question: should such decisions be made at the prerogative of singular political leaders? Political leaders rarely have the situated knowledge needed to make context-sensitive decisions. As Tufekci suggests, perhaps a more efficient approach to handling a pandemic would be to make room for local initiatives and responses, which would give power back to the communities where people make the everyday decisions that matter for the spread of the virus. The general tendency has, however, been to move political power in the reverse direction. In the Danish case, the pandemic affected the implementation of a new ‘law of epidemics’ that, in effect, expanded executive powers. As the Danish prime minister put it, “At the end of the day, it is the political leader, who must take responsibility for the important decisions” (Tønder 2020, 58; our translation).

From a democratic perspective, the pandemic has revealed a deep distrust by political authorities in the democratic public and local initiative, and demonstrated how political decision-making processes tend to become more centralized in the face of societal threats. This should come as no surprise. Political theorists have long argued that emergencies tend to create anti-democratic pressures (Agamben 2005; Honig 2009; 2014; Lazar 2009; Scarry 2012). In the face of more crisis-ridden Anthropocene futures, this tendency is particularly worrisome. Moreover, even in the Danish case, where the public response to COVID-19 has been relatively successful from an epidemiological perspective, elements of the response have revealed a number of problematic elements of a centralized nation-state politics. As we argue in the next section, the pandemic has simultaneously exposed a range of deep inequalities and injustices of existing democracies and put on display what we call a ‘biopolitical desire for control’ that manifests itself as a drive towards fortification at multiple scales.

**Fortification and The Biopolitical Desire for Pandemic Control**

If we return to the metaphor of the coronavirus as a contrast agent, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated, and revealed anew, the inequalities of existing liberal democracies, particularly along racialized lines of division. Disease and death rates have been highest in Black, Indigenous, and people of color, reflecting a history of “respiratory inequities” connected to systemic racism, environmental injustice, and public health failings for these communities in the US (Gaffney 2020; see also Zhou 2021). The result was that the largest drop in life expectancy was among Black people, who were also far more likely to die young (Arias, Tejada-Vera, and Ahmad 2021). Vulnerable populations in prisons and immigration detention centers were disproportionately exposed to infection. In addition to the direct effects of disease and death, the pandemic made the failure of social systems more evident: hunger and food insecurity rose sharply, homelessness rose and became harsher, and medical systems struggled to treat other illnesses (Feeding America 2020). Individualized precautionary measures accentuated class disparities, with the rich often able to approach lockdowns and quarantines as a country-side retreat. The
category of “essential worker” conveyed recognition for those who kept basic services running, but it often failed to provide corresponding material support for the safety of these workers. As education shifted online, inequalities in computer and internet access became evident. The vaccine rollout has revealed stark divisions within and between states. On the international scale, the director of the WHO observed in May 2021, that the world has entered a condition of “vaccine apartheid,” where poorer countries in the Global South have had access to only a small supply of vaccines (Reuters 2021).

Faced with a transnational pandemic that reveals entanglements across bodies, borders, and species, projects of biopolitical fortification, already intent on policing the boundaries of social hierarchy, have been given new form and intensity. This form of control over the life of the population appears in attempts to sort ‘good’ and ‘bad’ circulations but also periodically seal off the outside world. The aim is one of building barriers able to keep risk and danger on the outside, whether that ‘outside’ is the individual, household, city, or nation-state. As a technique of power, fortification relies on elaborate systems of surveillance and spatial policing while also incorporating brute acts of physical obstruction (Denman 2020, 233–35). This desire to fortify involves an ontology of mastery in which the nonhuman world can be subjected to complete human control through a combination of positivist knowledge, technological rationality, physical force, national power, and/or and private wealth.

In its most exaggerated form, the desire to fortify the self takes physical form in the bunkers of the rich and highly mobile. A high-end “disaster preparedness industry” markets multimillion-dollar, hardened shelters primarily to a clientele of tech billionaires (Carville 2020). Some of the available bunkers are abandoned military storage facilities in South Dakota converted, albeit crudely, into livable dwellings. However, the most exclusive private fortified sites are located in New Zealand, where real-estate developers and engineering firms offer luxury accommodations in which to ride out global crises in comfort (Carville 2020; Garrett 2020; Sullivan 2021). The bunkers are sold as a form of privatized defense suitable to any number of catastrophic events: ecological crisis, nuclear warfare, civil unrest, and global pandemic. The appeal of these bunker-retreats reached their height during the pandemic. The willingness to take risk for high profit returns stands in stark contrast to a refusal to endure any risk alongside fellow citizens.

New Zealand has particular appeal because the remote island geography offers an enhanced sense of privatized security. The logic of fortification through the use of remote island geography appears as the mirror image of Australia’s “Pacific Solution,” whereby asylum seekers are detained on remote islands. The ultra-rich are invited to seek sanctuary from the global pandemic in the bunkers of the South West Pacific while at the same time refugees are shuttled through a carceral archipelago where crowded spaces

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5 In thinking about fortification as a type of biopolitics, we are following Aradau and Tazzioli’s (2020) suggestion of “biopolitics multiple,” which proposes a need to consider the numerous ways in which forms of life are apprehended and populations are governed that exceed Foucault’s initial outline of biopolitical technologies.
of detention create ideal conditions for the transmission of the coronavirus. Australia’s policy of border externalization creates multiple layers of detention, one in the carceral site of the detention center camp and another through the island itself. The aim of deterring future asylum seekers through strandedness and isolation ushers in “parallel and interlocking geographies of detention” (Mountz 2020, 105).

Yet, the protections of these bunkers often prove as elusive as the attempts to subject the nonhuman world to sovereign mastery. For instance, details from design and engineering firms building bunkers are sparse, concealed under the rationale of “client confidentiality.” Many of the bunker projects seem to be little more than large-scale, protracted grifts. Bradley Garrett notes that he was subject to numerous diversions when requesting evidence of the actual structures being built (Garrett 2020, 141). Reflecting on this “charade,” he further observes that the promise of solidity and security was sometimes only ever realized as speculation and dissimulation. If we interpret this failure of these architectural projects in light of the ontological lessons of the pandemic, it seems that the desire to build fortified, impermeable space appears as little more than a fantasy of sovereign mastery and atomistic individualism (Brown 2010). Despite the wish to withdraw from the world, entanglements of human and nonhuman and ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ persist.

The bunker has wider cultural significance, disclosing a desire for enclosure and protection against the unknown. Playing on a heightened sense of vulnerability in an increasingly complex, globalized, and fragile world made evident in the pandemic, the bunker promises a hermetically sealed environment, a space subject to artificial control. Garrett’s critique of disaster architecture does not stop at questioning dubious claims of bunker-building firms. He notes, “The withdrawal of the rich and powerful into fortified and hidden bunker-enclaves … is the logical end point of the atomization of social life, one in which we build armoured redoubts to keep wealth and possessions inside and potentially hostile forces out” (Garrett 2020, 7). This process has transposed strategies of geopolitical defense into the creation of domestic space (Virilio 1994; Atkinson and Blandy 2016). However, the bunker is not merely civil defense, a human-scale effort to protect against disaster. Instead, it might be understood as an anti-civil and anti-social defense, seeking to isolate, contain, and disrupt the forms of relationality on which democratic life depends. Bunkers are a form of “social-contract-failure architecture,” embodying social systems in crisis and a collapse of the common (Garrett 2020, 29). As such, the bunker is indicative of deep, anti-democratic fractures.

Bunkerization plays out on multiple scales. The militarization of US, European, and Australian borders have turned states into bunkers that attempt to seal themselves off from migrants and refugees. Physical walls and fences are further reinforced by “smart walls” of sensors and surveillance technologies. As Mark Duffield notes long before the start of the pandemic, we have been in the midst of a “global lockdown... embodied in the rise of Fortress Europe (or America or Australia, for that matter)” (Duffield 2011, 765, our emphasis). Militarized borders facing the global South enforce class domination.
and racial hierarchy through attempts to violently disentangle a globalized world (Mbembe 2019, 96–104; Chacón 2018). The crises of occupation, incarceration, and confinement—each its own kind of lockdown—can be traced to carceral logics preceding the pandemic. The democratic challenge of the pandemic is less the novel use of emergency power and more the ways in which a new crisis has been used to reinforce existing biopolitical operations and controls.

The desire to fortify appears in the adoption of a national frame that informs both cultural understandings and political responses to disease. Priscilla Wald (2008: 51) writes, “the effort to contain the spread of a disease may involve international cooperation, but is cast in distinct national terms … the global threat has a national solution.” Furthermore, this insistence on a national frame posits “the nation as immunological ecosystem” (Wald 2008, 53). We hear of the “arrival” of diseases and a “jump” from one country to another, as if transmission from one human carrier to another depended on an individual’s nationality. Wald notes that the imagined community of the nation obscures the planetary scale of disease and epidemiology. The phenomenon of disease is unequivocally global: transmission proceeds through global infrastructures of mobility; epidemiological knowledge relies on data sharing; and prevention, treatment, and vaccination depends on global cooperation and supply chains.

Yet, the focus remains on an outbreak narrative that locates disease in the Other. The result has been a nationalist resurgence that has capitalized on this outbreak narrative to impose restrictive immigration policies and narrow rules of asylum. Harsha Walia has traced in detail the ways in which contemporary borders, only hardened under the pandemic, continue legacies of colonialism and dispossession, regulating mobility of people subject to exploitation and imperial rule. As Walia notes, “[t]he pandemic, like every global crisis before it, provides a perfect excuse to hasten in the vision of securitized borders and usher state of emergency into permanency” (Walia 2021, 10). Here, it is not the pandemic that creates an emergency of border closure. Rather, the pandemic serves as a pretext to normalize the already exceptional exercises of state power applied at borders. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to expand policing, detention, and carceral power over migrants and refugees already within a territory (Walia 2021, 11). Around the globe, fifty-seven countries closed borders to those seeking asylum (UNHCR 2020). Continued deportations added pressure to countries with already strained health systems (Kassie and Marcolini 2020; Walia 2021, 12). Immigration detention centers, along with most carceral spaces, became sites of severe outbreak due to insufficient precautions and a lack of space for social distancing (Vogl et al. 2020). Despite appeals by public health officials and migrants’ rights organizations to arrange for the release of people from detention facilities, the politics of fortified national borders has largely ruled out this course of action.

The border closure that came into effect in Denmark on March 14, 2020 was referred to by Søren Brostrøm, the director of the National Board of Health, as a “political decision,” not one grounded in the recommendation of public health officials (Batchelor 2020; our translation). While Brostrøm qualified his
claim by stating that he supported the political measure, the previous director of Sundhedsstyrelsens, Else Smith, referred to the closure as an “extreme initiative” (Rasmussen and Bredsdorff 2020; our translation). Danish public health scholars and experts noted that the coronavirus was already spreading within Denmark at that time, and seemed to suggest that the border closure was a distraction from other prevention and testing measures. This decision fits into a pattern of Social Democrats adopting anti-immigrant and restrictive border policies. During this time, emergency law authorized new police powers and police discretion often served as the basis for the enforcement of new rules over access to public space. This expansion briefly included a system to report the behavior of individuals “believed or presumed to be infected with COVID-19” (The Local 2020). Reports would be sent to the Danish Patient Safety Authority who could involve the police if deemed necessary. Fortunately, the system was taken down in the first week after it became evident that this de facto deputization of every citizen would give rise to proliferating suspicion and stoke xenophobic tendencies. Nonetheless, xenophobia in Denmark has taken new form with the pandemic through the early suspension of naturalization ceremonies, the spread of anti-Asian racism, and Islamophobic scapegoating (Peltier 2020; Ringgaard 2020).

The politics of fortification on display in response to COVID-19 tells the story of what Achille Mbembe (2019: 9-11) has called an ongoing partitioning of the world and “exit from democracy.” For Mbembe, modern democracies find themselves haunted by disavowed pasts of slavery, colonization, and miltarism and an ominous present of police violence, mass detention, and refoulment. As such, modern democracy threatens to turn itself inside out, with its repressed “nocturnal body” overwhelming its redistribution of power and egalitarian promise (Mbembe 2019, 15–20). Opting for fortification instead of solidarity and ethno-nationalism instead of inter- and trans-nationalism portends a future governed by this nocturnal body of democracy. The planetary entanglements made evident by COVID-19 and global climate change reveal the urgency of this challenge to democracy.

The need for more democratic and solidaric responses in times of emergency

Despite anti-democratic pressures, the notion that we could, even if we wanted to, respond to the political and ecological crises of the Anthropocene by doubling down on a politics of fortification is at best a dangerous illusion. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown just how futile it is, in the long run, to fight a global pandemic by shoring up borders and relying on individualist measures. In the short run, border closings might seem like a good idea, but even heavily policed borders are porous and viral pathogens do not abide by national jurisdictions, and if the world’s most affluent countries do not soon start shipping vaccines doses to the world’s poorest countries, many of which have currently vaccinated a tiny fraction of their populations and are facing vaccine shortages, it will come back and haunt them in form of unending cycles of new mutations and new waves of infection. The only thing that is going to hamper the new coronavirus, in the long term, is the ongoing sharing of knowledge and expertise across
borders, which already allowed for an incredibly quick turnaround in the development of the vaccine, and the eventual proliferation of those same vaccines to all of the world’s countries.

In a world of entanglement and increased interdependence, what happens in one place of the globe often has ripple effects throughout the rest of the complex global system. This is true not only in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, but for the climatic and ecological crises currently facing societies around the world. There is no stopping rising temperatures with more border policing, and while sea walls might temporarily keep out rising waters, in the places where communities can afford them, they are at best short-sighted (and expensive) measures of mitigation (Goodell 2018). The futility of sticking to a nation-based politics of fortification is only going to become more evident, when in a few decades from now, there could be hundreds of millions more climate-related refugees in the world. What happens to the political regimes of liberal democracies then? How do they, how do we respond?

What is needed to address the challenges of the Anthropocene, therefore, and to navigate the crises to come, is not a world of increasingly fortified nation states, but a world of international democratic solidarity that transcends national borders. In a world that is becoming more unstable and crisis-ridden, the desire for control amidst uncertainty, and the subsequent drive towards fortification fuelled by ethno-nationalist forces, is likely to increase in strength. That is why there is an urgent need right now to build new democratic networks and alliances that can work as countervailing forces. At the moment, this might look like a losing battle. But many things are already happening on the ground today that ought to make us at least somewhat hopeful. To recognize their potential, however, it requires that we start looking at democratic action through a different lens and locate new potentials for transformative change in what might appear as unlikely places. Therefore, in the next and final section of this article, we offer a new way of thinking and theorizing about transformative democratic politics, which draws on new developments within democratic theory, and conclude by offering suggestions as to how disconcerted democratic efforts might come to grow and resonate. How they might become more ‘viral’.

The Aspirational Lesson: Contagion, Change and Becoming-Viral

Although emergencies, like a pandemic, can put pressure on democratic procedures, they also offer political “openings” where hitherto seemingly stable systems prove themselves to be more malleable than previously thought. As the political theorist Andrew Poe writes in his reflections about the pandemic, after catching the virus himself in the spring of 2020, “the COVID-19 pandemic, while horrific, can also provide the opportunity for developing a new democratic habitus” (Poe 2020, 41). After all, the pandemic has revealed that existing societies, including entire economies and individual habits, can change almost overnight, if only the desire to do so is sufficiently strong. On the 11th of March 2020, the Danish

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6 For an overview of the different numerical projections of climate-related refugees, see (Luetz 2020).
government enforced a near total societal lockdown in response to the new viral threat: Public institutions closed down, employees were sent home, public transport was reduced, and the borders were effectively closed. All in the span of less than 48 hours (Poe 2020, 42). While “the anxiety around emergencies is easy to identify” and “the misuse of sovereign power in the name of safety, security, or salvation is a serious danger,” emergencies also provide welcome “opportunities for solidarity and the development of our democratic senses.” (Poe 2020, 42).

In order to fulfill this aspiration, however, we must learn from the ongoing crises and use them to start thinking about what a new democratic habitus, suited for a future of ongoing climatic and ecological crises, might look like, and how such a habitus can be cultivated through political action. Here, we would like to make a somewhat unusual proposition: That we can learn something not only from the political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, but from the virus itself. The SARS-CoV-2 virus variant has proven itself to be incredibly proficient. In the course of a relatively short time, it developed from a single outbreak in central China to a global pandemic affecting countries all across the world. At the time of writing this article, there have been more than 200 million confirmed cases worldwide (and with unconfirmed cases, the number is much higher). What are the pathogenic and epidemiological conditions that allowed for this rapid viral expansion? And how might we use the image of the virus to think, metaphorically and creatively, about the conditions that would allow for a new democratic habitus to also spread like a virus? How might, in other words, existing democratic efforts to fight the current climatic and ecological crises become more viral?

The idea of theorizing social dynamics through the lens of (biological) transmission and contagion is not new to the social sciences. Around the turn of the 20th century, the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde prominently suggested the concept of ‘imitation’, conscious and unconscious, as a model of contagious social change that could help explain the social dynamics of complex human societies better than prevailing models, such as that of social facticity suggested by Emile Durkheim. Instead of insisting, as Durkheim did, that ‘the social’ constituted its own sphere distinct from all other domains, Tarde insisted that the science of the social had to view itself as growing out of and in extension with other domains, including that of biology and psychology. Tarde’s insistence on theorizing human societies and individual activities as simultaneously social and biological, material and mental, has been taken up in recent decades by other social and political thinkers, such as for example Bruno Latour (2002) and Christian Borch (2014; 2019).

7 For an insightful take on this disagreement, see the transcript from the playful reconstruction of the debate that took place between the two thinkers at École des Hautes Études Sociales in 1903, written by Bruno Latour, Eduardo Viana Vargas, Bruno Karsenti, Frédérique Aït-Touatt, and Louise Salmon: http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/TARDE-DURKHEIM-GB.pdf (English translation by Amaleena Damlé and Matei Candea).
In a recent blog post, Borch argues that COVID-19 has made the need for such a cross-disciplinary perspective relevant again: “In a time of deep viral and financial distress, it seems appropriate to ask how biology and contagion can teach us a thing or two about how societies get destabilized—and how we can rally ourselves in response.” (Borch 2020). Or, as the mathematician and scholar of infectious diseases Adam Kucharski writes in *The Rules of Contagion*, whether “we’re interested in spreading ideas and innovations, or stopping viruses and violence, we need to identify what’s really driving contagion,” which “means thinking about people as well as pathogens. From innovations to infections, contagion is often a social process.” (Kucharski 2020). Of course, there are important material differences between how a virus and democratic action spreads, but separating them *a priori* as belonging to two categorically different spheres, two distinct natures, risks making us inattentive to the ways in which they might also share certain traits.

One way to connect these reflections more explicitly to democratic politics is by turning to Romand Coles’ innovative work on the parallels between complexity theory and democratic organizing (Coles 2016, ch. 3). In complex systems, small changes happening in one place, like a virus jumping from an non-human animal to a human host, can create cataclysmic effects throughout the entire system. For that to happen, however, it requires the right conditions. In the case of a global pandemic, it depends on at least three factors: emergence, transmission, and receptivity. First, there must be apt conditions for the initial emergence of a new virus variant, which requires susceptible hosts (such as stressed farm animals or animals whose natural habitats are threatened\(^8\)) where the pathogen can develop and eventually mutate in ways that allows it to become zoonotic, i.e. able to jump between interspecies hosts. Second, it depends on routes of transmission, which in the case of SARS-CoV-2 work through various forms of host-to-host interaction, including the exchange of small liquid particles that spread when people “cough, sneeze, speak, sing” or even “breathe” (WHO 2021). Thirdly, for a new virus variant to spread quickly, and to keep spreading to the point of a pandemic, it requires consistent access to a sufficiently large group of susceptible hosts with a high receptivity to infection. In today’s interconnected and crisis-ridden world, most of these conditions were easily met.

Something similar is the case with democratic action. Small changes, small acts of democation resistance and innovations can, under the right circumstances, come to produce great, cataclysmic effects. But, like the virus, it depends on certain conditions, which also have to do with emergence, transmission, and receptivity, albeit in different ways. Let us address each of these three aspects in more detail.

**Emergence: Creative experimentations at the Edge of Chaos**

\(^8\) Like in the case of humans, stressed animals are more prone to become sick (Asres and Amha 2014; Proudfoot and Habing 2015).
For a new idea or practice to take hold, it must first arise, which requires apt conditions for newness and creative experimentation. In the field of evolutionary biology, researchers have found that so-called ‘sub-critical’ systems tend to win out over the course of natural selection. They do so, because they are able to combine a dynamic openness and creative flexibility, when faced with new challenges, with maintaining relative stability. These sub-critical systems and organisms survive, in other words, because they are able to inhabit that space in between rigid order and total chaos, where “emergent phenomena are most likely to occur”, without being overwhelmed by constant changes and fluctuations that would prevent new and more stable patterns from “emerging and enduring” (Coles 2016, 134ff.). We could say something similar in the case of democratic action and political change. Here, too, political cultures might become too unorganized, leading to little actual action, or, more often, sway too much in the direction of rigid order, leaving little room for experimentation and new ideas.

In the political sphere, the equivalent of too ordered systems, are those political cultures that are unwilling, or unable, to enter into dialogue or experimentation with “different visions of transformative pathways and aspirations”, and therefore “tend to isolate and vitiate new ideas and practices within and among their organizations” (Coles 2016, 136). In such cases, there is a need to push political systems and cultures closer to the edge of chaos. In more practical terms, this suggests a need for pursuing a type of democratic politics that allows room for creative experimentation and local differentiation, rather than insisting on a single, right way of doing things. Even the United Nations have acknowledged that facing up to the ecological and climatic challenges of the present is going to require “rapid and far-reaching” changes to all sectors of existing societies (IPCC 2018). Therefore, we are going to need everyone on board in the hope of enabling the collective intelligence of many people, in many places working at once.

Here we might find inspiration in one of the most successful green social movements in recent years, the German ‘Ende Galände’, who works to close down existing brown coal mines through direct nonviolent actions. As one of their spokesperson said in a recent interview, in hierarchical organizations “there’s one mind making decisions. Here at Ende Gelände, we have thousands of minds making decisions” (Freeman-Woolpert 2017). Such a distributed and seemingly disordered, indeed anarchic, approach to democratic is likely going to require a process of learning; especially in countries like Denmark, where citizens are used to looking to the state in times of emergency, because it has historically been the guarantor of public safety, health, education, etc. In the beginning of the pandemic, many countries experienced some of the dangers of social contagion and panic behaviour, when people started hoarding toilet paper and hand sanitizer. But the pandemic has also given rise to more positive viral responses, such as the emergence of new and spontaneous networks of mutual aid that might outlive the pandemic (Christensen et al. 2020). From volunteers helping out infected people with door-to-door deliveries in areas where the state support is either absent or exhausted, to more symbolic actions of
solidarity and care in the virtual realm, the pandemic has seen a rise in decentrally organized mutual aid efforts (Andersen et al. 2020; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2021; Shabi 2021).

It is moments like these – moments and spaces of spontaneous emergence happening outside or at the edges of orderly political systems and cultures – that a more viral approach to democratic politics pushes us to both pay more attention to and to help cultivate.

**Transmission: Multi-sited Action and Generative Joy**

When new ideas and behavior emerge, the next question is one of transmission: How do these innovations come to spread and endure? What are their mechanisms of transmission? How might they come to proliferate fast and wide enough to counter both the ecological crises unfolding at a global scale today, and the problematic political responses that follow in their wake?

Not unlike a virus, ideas and behavior spread through host interaction. But different from viral transmission, which depends on physical proximity between hosts, the mechanism of transmission can take many different forms and can spread even through virtual forms of interaction. When it comes to social behavior, the dynamics of transmission are notoriously complex. As Kucharski writes, “we might only start doing something after we’ve seen multiple other people doing it, in which case there is no single clear route of transmission.” (Kucharski 2020, 129). Where a virus can spread from one host to another through a single interaction, the contagion of social norms and behavior tend to require multiple rounds of exposure and learning to take hold.

This complexity highlights the need for democratic action to take place at many levels and sites at once, in order to produce as many paths of transmission as possible; from small-scale behavior change and community-level initiatives to parliamentary victories and extra-institutional activism. The work will have to be done on all of these fronts simultaneously. Contrary to what some eco-Marxist theories of democratic resistance have suggested, these different efforts do not necessarily compete in a zero-sum game, but can be thought of as multiple, and potentially reinforcing, channels of transmission. It is no longer an either-or – either grassroots activism or parliamentary reform, either ecovillages or green public infrastructure – but a both-and. The need to work on several routes of transmission at once is amplified by the presence of strong countervailing forces, such as decades of neoliberal reforms and increasing racial and economic inequality and political polarization, which limit the ability of democratic energies to spread. Moreover, as Connolly (2017; 2008, 39) has detailed in his discussion of both “aspirational fascism” and “evangelical-capitalist resonance machines,” far right anti-democratic forces have become effective at utilizing channels of affective transmission to amplify authoritarian impulses, neoliberal hegemony, and imperial reach.

To counter this tendency, there is a corollary need to build networks across lines of difference and marginalization. One way to do so is through ongoing efforts of community organizing, which aims to
take seriously the situated struggle of marginalized communities while finding the ways in which their needs and desires can be tied into the fight for a more sustainable planet. Another way to boost the rate of transmission is by insisting on what Jane Bennett and others have called ‘generative joy’, which can help produce more positive, and therefore contagious, political affects. There is an unfortunate tendency, in activist politics, to frame democratic resistance in pessimistic or even dystopic registers. And for good reasons too, since the world really is full of injustice, but it risks making participation in them mentally and also physically exhausting. And if people burn out, they stop transmitting. Therefore, there is a need to invent and think about how to also engage in more joyous forms of resistance.9

Here we might return, again, to learn from the activist movement Ende Gelände, who begins their collective actions with what might best be described as a sort of camp-site festival. On the day before an action, the activists get together to around political talks, live music, vegan meals, yoga lessons and much more (Freeman-Woolpert 2017). Part the purpose of the camp site is a practical matter of planning the details of the action happening the next day. But it also serves another function: Establishing community through the sharing joyous experiences and building excitement before a day full of physical and mental struggle, exhaustion, and even pain. Here, it seems that the organizers at Ende Gelände might have learned a thing or two from the 20th century political activist and anarchist, Emma Goldman, who allegedly said something along the lines: If I can’t dance, I won’t be part of your revolution.

Receptivity: A Micropolitics of Sensorial Reorientation

New ideas and behaviors arise, and are being spread by democratic activists across many different sites and scales. But spreading them is one thing, another is whether people on the receiving end are susceptible to integrating those ideas and behaviors into their own lives. In order to take hold, to become truly viral, there is need for a continuous supply of new hosts, who are receptive to their agendas and goals. In the case of a virus, what determines receptivity is a matter of pathogen features and immune systems. For example, although all age groups can be subject to infection, young children are less susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 than older, or immunocompromised individuals, who also experience more severe symptoms (Jordan and Adab 2020).

In the case of social dynamics, such as the spread of democratic norms and actions, what determines receptivity looks different. We tend to think of the spread of ideas as a primarily mental or cognitive process; we hold certain beliefs, and if those beliefs become challenged, convinced by new arguments, we eventually will follow suit. But that relies on an overly simplified model of mental learning, which underestimates the role of corporeal and reflexive learning. As Bruno Latour has argued

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9 Another way to go here, which is not explored in this article, might also be to think about the way that comedy, or what political theorist Lars Tønder (2014) calls ‘Comic Power’, can turn critique and resistance into more joyous, perhaps even humorous, forms.
in his Facing Gaia lectures from 2017, becoming sensitive to a problem that you have hitherto neglected or even actively dismissed, often requires repeated loops of knowledge in order to take effect. As he says, think about “how many loops some of you had to follow before giving up smoking.” You probably “always knew that cigarettes caused cancer, but there’s a long way to go between that ‘knowledge’ and really stopping smoking” (Latour 2017, 140). In other words, becoming sensitive to a problem, and eventually being able to take action on it, is “a slow, gradual fusion of cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic virtues thanks to which the loops are made more and more visible” (Latour 2017, 140).

This is part of the reason why some contemporary democratic theorists have started talking about the importance of a sensorial ‘micropolitics’ that also addresses the more corporeal and affective registers of human experience, and not just at the cognitive levels, when promoting democratic change (Tønder 2015; Bennett 2010b, xii; Connolly 2017, 56ff.). As William Connolly writes, we must

become involved in experimental micropolitics on a variety of fronts, as we participate in role experimentations, social movements, artistic displays, erotic-political shows, electoral campaigns, and creative interventions on the new media to help recode the ethos that now occupies investment practices, consumption desires, family savings, state priorities, church assemblies, university curricula, and media reporting. (Connolly 2013, 38)

This insistence on micropolitics as a means of sensorial reorientation, and an integral element of transformative democratic politics, puts responsibilities back upon individuals, and groups of individuals, to do some of the work of addressing deeply ingrained corporeal desires and mental attitudes in order to make themselves, and each other, more receptive towards the new ideas and behavior needed for the future to come. Not because change should end at the individual level, but because, as Bennett writes in the beginning of Vibrant Matter, “There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extensions of rights without human dispositions, moods and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects” (Bennett, 2010, xii).

This micropolitical reorientation and its possibilities for ‘scaling up’ are evident in the rapid growth of the Antiwork movement. Years of eroding working conditions due to the advance of neoliberalism, expanded precarity, and attacks on labor created mounting affective dissonances and propelled deeper questioning of a society that valorized and insisted upon endless work. The virus has served as a catalyst for the movement, propelling a ‘Great Resignation,’ wherein degrading working conditions made more dangerous due to COVID led to a huge number of workers leaving their jobs. This has inspired not only individual acts of refusal, but critical orientations to work and examinations of moralizing productivism (Weeks, 2011, 11-14). Within this movement, the Antiwork subreddit has offered an important space for affective expression. The subreddit features stories of abuse and exploitation by employers, condescending offers of employment, screenshots, memes, and tweets that
capture the absurdities of work today. This space of discontent has contributed to planning and political action, providing an avenue to share ideas about labor organizing, experiences and challenges of unionization, information about strikes and other acts of work refusal, and a horizon of politics in which, as the subreddit’s tagline suggests, “Unemployment [is] for all, not just the rich!”.  

**Concluding Remarks: Towards a Viral Politics of Swarming**

The COVID-19 pandemic entails a warning sign of a more unstable future to come. The question is what to make of that warning. Do we heed its advice, or do we keep stumbling blindly and naively down the current path? Will the end of the pandemic be followed by an impatient return to business as usual, or will we be able to meet the challenge formulated so poignantly by David Graeber in his posthumous essay about the pandemic, written shortly before his premature death in 2020:

> Why not instead, once the current emergency is declared over, actually remember what we’ve learned: that if “the economy” means anything, it is the way we provide each other with what we need to be alive (in every sense of the term), that what we call ‘the market’ is largely just a way of tabulating the aggregate desires of rich people, most of whom are at least slightly pathological, and the most powerful of whom were already completing the designs for the bunkers they plan to escape to if we continue to be foolish enough to believe their minions’ lectures that we were all, collectively, too lacking in basic common sense do anything about oncoming catastrophes. (Graeber 2021)

In this article, we have tried to take Graeber’s plea seriously and offered three vital lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. At an ontological level, the pandemic has highlighted the deep entanglement and fragility of the modern world, while reminding us of the active powers of the many nonhuman forces that we depend on, and that surround and penetrate us. At the same time, the political responses to the pandemic have shown, and extended, deep structural inequalities of existing democratic societies and helped fuel problematic political desires towards fortification, which will be wholly unable to deal with the Anthropocene futures to come. But the pandemic also offers a third, more aspirational lesson, namely that a transformative democratic politics must itself become more like the virus. More viral. Drawing on new developments in democratic theory and theories of complex systems, we have argued that democratic resistance today must leave space open to experimenting with new and more ethical and sustainable ways of life, while promoting many different routes of transmission and operating as multiple scales at once, all the way from the micropolitical work of affective receptivity to the global level of planetary change.

The aspirational approach to democratic politics we have sketched out is not unlike what political theorist William Connolly has elsewhere called a “Politics of Swarming”, inspired by the complex movements of swarms, such as a flight of birds or a school of fish, where the direction of the swarm is controlled by the collective intelligence arising from the free and creative movements by individuals and
groups of individuals within the system (Connolly 2017, ch. 5). Applying this lens to democratic politics, it promotes a democratic strategy that resists the idea that there is one “right” kind of political action, which must be directed by a single centre of control. In contrast, a swarming democratic politics is one that promotes many different forms of action happening in several places and at several scales at once. This includes creative role experimentations at an individual level, which help build receptivity towards new ideas as well as community organizing efforts that build relationality between different communities and promote new routes of transmission. But it also includes efforts at a more institutional level, such as public demonstrations and new social movements that might help bring about change at the level of state politics, and in the end help change the direction of the entire swarm. Working within and against existing liberal-democratic institutions is not an either-or, but a both-and.

Coupled with our viral concepts such as creative emergence, joyful transmission and a micropolitics of receptivity, this vision of democratic politics is a particularly demanding one, because it requires that everyone takes part in the action, and pushes for change in their part of the network; not unlike an individual agent of virus trying to infect a new host. As Connolly writes, the ecological and political crisis facing the planet today urges us to simultaneously slow down at key points and moments as we enhance sensitivity to the course of things outside our habitual modes of perception, expectation, and security and speed up a series of changes in contemporary role definitions, identities, faiths, public ethos, state priorities, and economic practices. (Connolly 2013, 11)

This is certainly no small or easy task, and not one that can be realized at the level of abstract theory, but will have to play itself out in the myriad, disconcerted, swarming democratic actions already taking place in many communities on the ground today. In the article, we have highlighted the generative joy of new green social movements such as Ende Gelände, the local mutual-aid networks arising in response to the pandemic, and the growing anti-work movement catalyzed by the new pandemic conditions, as prefigurative examples of such a viral politics – and the list could easily be extended with other spontaneous forms of self-organized struggle. Whether these and other efforts are going to be enough to ward off the worst consequences of the grave challenges facing human societies in the Anthropocene, only time will tell. But one thing is certain, their eventual success is beginning to look more and more like what Connolly has called an improbable necessity (2017, 12).

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