

# The Mask of Universality: Politics in the Pandemic Response

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**Abstract:** Proponents of wearing masks during the pandemic have argued that the mask is not political and simply serves public health. This essay argues that the mask is actually an important political signifier, a signifier that points toward universality. This is why contemporary populist leaders have refused to adopt policies mandating masks, despite the political benefits that such a policy would bring them. As an indication of universality, the mask represents a threat not just to populist leaders but also to the prevailing liberal ideology underlying the capitalist economy. The mask brings us into a constant confrontation with universality, which is the foundation for an emancipatory challenge to the logic of capitalism.

**Keywords:** Mask, pandemic, universality, psychoanalysis, liberalism

## Trump's Self-Destruction

We should always pay strict attention when people act openly against their own interest. Such moments reveal the unconscious politics at work in their actions and expose what the articulation of a political position cannot typically state directly. At these times, we see the unconscious investment that sustains a political position. Acts that defy one's own self-interest are necessarily unconscious acts because we consciously always pursue our own interest.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, acts against self-interest are as revelatory as dreams, slips, and jokes, the three modes of unconscious revelation that Freud emphasizes after the discovery of psychoanalysis.

During the course of the coronavirus pandemic, we can see a blatant case of acting against their own interest in the leadership of two of the world's leading right-wing populists, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. As the pandemic began to rage in their countries, both Bolsonaro and Trump flouted the guidelines of medical experts and inveighed against wearing a mask as a way of combatting the pandemic. In contrast to most other leaders around the world, they refused to make masks mandatory and even went so far as to mock those who wore masks or mandated them. Trump poked fun at his electoral opponent, Joe Biden, for his refusal to appear in public without a large mask, which Trump interpreted as a signifier of weakness. Although Trump eventually relented and

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<sup>1</sup>This is how we should read Blaise Pascal's famous statement about our uniform pursuit of happiness. This holds, provided that one is talking about consciousness rather than the unconscious. Pascal writes, "All men seek to be happy. This is without exception, whatever different means they use. They all strive toward this end. What makes some go to war, and others avoid it, is the same desire in both, accompanied by different perspectives. The will never takes the slightest step except toward this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who go hang themselves." Pascal 2005, p. 181. Pascal's claim doesn't ring true to us today precisely because we live in the aftermath of the Freudian event.

reluctantly accepted the necessity of masks (without, however, issuing a national order for them), he couldn't abandon expressions of derision for them. In Brazil, the congress had to override Bolsonaro's veto to issue a national mask order. What makes this recalcitrant opposition to the mask difficult to understand is that it cuts against the electoral prospects of both figures. As certain of their supporters correctly apprehended, masks would help authorities control the virus and thereby aid in boosting the leaders' popularity. No one sustains popularity by governing over the mass death of one's supporters, unless one has a foreign enemy to blame for the carnage.

What's more, if mask-wearing became widespread, the economic fortunes of Brazil and the United States would have stood a much better chance of rebounding, which is what both leaders wanted. The economic downturn that the coronavirus precipitated endangered the reelection chances of both Bolsonaro and Trump, but they consistently refused to take the simplest and most obvious step in the direction of an economic recovery. Their refusal of the mask has found a positive response among their supporters, with some going so far as to assault those who insist on the mask. These attacks indicate the vehemence with which populists cling to their refusal of the mask, and this vehemence suggests the power of the mask as a specific signifier. But what does the mask signify?

Right-wing populists recoil from the mask because it functions as a stand-in for the missing signifier of universality. Right-wing politics has its basis in the rejection of universality in favor of the claims of particular identity, which manifests itself as white nationalism in the case of Trump. The universal has an inherently leftist valence because it connects everyone together and enables them to see their collective interdependence. Universality represents a lethal danger for the identity politics that Trump and Bolsonaro practice. But the populist political position depends on followers not recognizing universality and their involvement in it. In order to follow the populist program, one must view oneself as an isolated monad that can acquire identity only through attachment to a national, religious, or ethnic project. If one apprehends one's attachment to the universal, if one sees that one is already part of a collective, the populist appeal necessarily falls on deaf ears. Populism promises the consolation of identity, but this consolation constitutes an effective appeal only insofar as the subject does not recognize its involvement in the universal. This is why obscuring universality is the foundational gesture of the populist program. The mask acts as a barrier to this project insofar as it constantly confronts the subject with universality.

Grasping the mask's connection to universality doesn't just clarify the role of and hostility to the mask. It also enables us to better understand what constitutes universality. What is universal is not something that everyone possesses in common. It is not our shared humanity or our common essence. It is what everyone shares

not having. Universality is a collective absence. This is what most theories of universality miss and also what distinguishes universality from domination. The universal is not a master signifier that demands conformity and imposes itself on different subjects—thereby eliminating their particular difference, as the critics of universality fear—but a missing signifier whose absence allows subjectivity to emerge. It is a signifier of lack that is itself necessarily lacking.

The absence of this signifier is what everyone must confront. It is a binding absence, an absence that connects us with every other subject. This signifier of universality is what Freud calls the primordially repressed (*die Urverdrängung*). The repression of the signifier of universality constitutes subjectivity by creating an opening within the order of signification through subjectivity can appear. Without this primordially repressed absence, there would be no gap within the signifying structure.<sup>2</sup> The gap in the symbolic structure, the empty space in the whole, is the basis for subjectivity. One signifier must be absent in order for the novelty of each subject to enter the symbolic structure.

In our everyday existence, this gap is not readily visible. We interact with others in a fetishistic relation that enables us to avoid confronting the ubiquitous emptiness by disavowing it. Thus, our primary experience of universality is its disavowal. Instead of confronting the universal absence, we experience images of fullness and completeness that fill in the gaps of the social order. For instance, rather than seeing the gap in a figure of authority, I take this authority as absolute treat it as a guide for my actions. Or I view the new pay raise that I receive as a form of completion. I miss the gap within signification by disavowing it, and in this way, I miss confronting universality.

This is what the pandemic gives us an opportunity to correct. By necessitating the wearing of masks to counteract its wide dissemination, the pandemic facilitates an encounter with universality. The pandemic makes the encounter with universality an everyday occurrence. The absence of the primordially repressed signifier becomes apparent through the mask. Every time I have to put on my own mask and encounter someone else wearing one, I experience a constraint on just doing what I want. But it isn't the capricious constraint of a threatening authority. It's the constraint of universality itself.

When we see someone masked, we don't all of a sudden have immediate access to the primordially repressed, but we confront directly the production of a blank space within the symbolic terrain. We see what points in the direction of universality, which exists at the point where something is missing in common. We are universal in our failure to have it all, and the mask signifies precisely this failure. This connection to universality is what upsets conservative critics, as they make evident in

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the theory of universality, see McGowan 2020.

their diatribes against mask wearing. Their focus is always on the shift in attitude that the mask suggests. For instance, Molly McCann, writing in *The Federalist*, claims, “If everyone is wearing a mask, it telegraphs a society-wide acceptance that the status quo has changed, and with that consensus other changes can come, too.... Our new normal will include a permanent expansion of the bureaucracy.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, we will become more attuned to the collectivity.

The mask doesn't just cover over our face but reveals the damage that we can do to the others. The mask points to universality because it indicates that the Other, the formation of the symbolic structure, is lacking. The Other is unable to sustain our relations without the introduction of this overt blank space into them. The social relation requires this obstacle in order to function and keep everyone alive.

When worn during a pandemic, the mask reveals the absent signifier of universality, the signifier that doesn't fit within our symbolic universe. The key to the mask is that the primary protection it offers is not for the one wearing it but for those one encounters. It indicates that wearers treat the Other as lacking, while they view themselves as excessive. I wear a mask because I am a threat to others in a way that the normal operations of the social order cannot contain. The wearers' excess is precisely what threatens the lacking Other. The mask contains this excess and renders it less lethal. The universal is not only manifested in the subject's dependence on the Other for its emergence as a subject but in the way that subjectivity exceeds itself and intrudes into the Other. I am never simply myself but always extend into the Other, just as the Other extends into me. No subject is simply isolated in itself, as a liberal philosophy would have it. The Other forms the subject, and the subject constantly exceeds itself and imposes itself on the Other. The mask makes this evident.

### The Apolitical Interpretation

In response to the populist rage against the mask, medical authorities and moderate political leaders have risen up to lament the politicization of the mask. Their claim is that the mask is nothing but a tool for public health and thus has no political bearing whatsoever. They insist on the scientific neutrality behind the campaign for masks and criticize those who seek to turn the mask into a political symbol. They recognize that politicizing the mask has the effect of causing certain people to reject it and even to become belligerent in their rejection.

Most critics of the populist leaders plead with them to recognize that the mask has nothing to do with politics. They lament the

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<sup>3</sup> McCann 2020, <https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/27/mandatory-masks-arent-about-safety-theyre-about-social-control/>.

politicization that wearing a mask has undergone. This is the position of Trump's own head of infectious diseases, Anthony Fauci. Commenting on the question of wearing masks, Fauci insists, “It should not be a political issue. It is purely a public health issue. Forget the politics. Look at the data.”<sup>4</sup> Fauci's plea to not politicize the issue of masks is actually aimed at his own boss, Donald Trump, and Trump's followers. Fauci's invocation of public health as a contrast to politics seems to make sense. Masks do save lives. But what Fauci misses—and what Trump and Bolsonaro get—is that masks do not save lives neutrally. The mask is a political signifier, which is why populists rightly view them with suspicion.

When Fauci defends his use of the mask, he inadvertently lets on that his investment in it actually goes beyond pure public health and enters the realm of politics. After claiming that a universal mask requirement was just the result of following the data, he gives a political justification for the mask. He states, “I mean, it's sort of respect for another person, and have that other person respect you. You wear a mask, they wear a mask, you protect each other.”<sup>5</sup> While Fauci's statement may sound to some like common sense, he's actually articulating a critique of the ruling liberal philosophy that forms the basis for capitalist society and the contemporary populist revolt. Fauci envisions the society as a collective in which the activity of each subject is directly involved in the activity of everyone else. His vision of a society of mutual protection is a distinctly anti-capitalist vision, not a conception of society in which each subject simply pursues its own interest regardless of its effect on others.

This is not just a slip into politics on Fauci's part. The mask requirement is political through and through because of the relationship that the mask has to otherness—specifically to the missing signifier within the Other. When we see others in masks, we don't see other isolated subjects but others who are intrinsically bound to us. The other's mask signifies what binds me to everyone else, which is why it cannot simply function as an apolitical tool for public health. Or we could say that the concern for public health is already a political concern because the emphasis on the public is intrinsically at odds with liberalism's insistence on the priority of the isolated individual. To invoke the public is to criticize the ruling liberal philosophy.

If we glance back at the origins of liberalism, the politics of the mask will quickly become clearer. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke makes evident that we exist first as individuals outside the constraints of the social order, and we enter into this order, which limits our freedom, solely to protect our goods. He writes, “The great

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<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in “Wearing Masks ‘Purely a Health Issue’” 2020: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-25/Wearing-masks-purely-a-health-issue-says-Fauci-RBwquCtUEU/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in “Wearing Masks ‘Purely a Health Issue’” 2020: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-25/Wearing-masks-purely-a-health-issue-says-Fauci-RBwquCtUEU/index.html>

and *chief end* therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, *is the Preservation of their Property.*<sup>6</sup> As Locke sees it, the only reason to accept the limitations on freedom that society imposes is to guarantee the safety of one's property. His liberalism betrays an investment in protecting capital and thereby shows how intertwined liberalism and capitalism truly are. Of course, Locke would see protection of one's life as another reason for accepting limitations on freedom. But those who reject masks do not view themselves as endangered. Their interest, as they understand it, receives no protection from the mask.

The decisive point in Locke's treatise is that he suggests that entrance into the social order is optional, that it is possible to exist as a subject outside social constraint. Locke takes the isolated individual as the starting point. When one does this, the universal necessarily appears as an unnecessary and avoidable encumbrance. Taking this approach to subjectivity, Locke fails to see that it is universality that constitutes subjectivity. If not for the universal missing signifier, the subject could not emerge at all. This missing signifier creates the opening through which the subject's emergence is possible. Thus, the subject begins from the perspective of universality and emerges as singular only subsequently. Universality is the *sine qua non* for the emergence of the subject.

When one advocates for masks, one implicitly recognizes the priority of the universal relative to the subject. The mask is an explicit nod to others, an avowal that the subject cannot avoid being implicated in the fate of others. Every activity of the subject occurs within the field of the Other. But what matters is that the subject acts in reference to what the Other doesn't have, to the missing signifier in the Other. It is the absence in the social field that shapes how the subject forms. The mask's intimate relationship to this absence constitutes its basic political valence.

In this sense, Bolsonaro and Trump are correct to fear that the mask represents a political signifier that bodes ill for them. The widespread acceptance of masks indicates that people are not looking at themselves as liberal subjects. Instead, they are implicitly nodding to the universal. The challenge that the mask poses to the liberal philosophy underlying capitalist society leads to a different approach to masks—an attempt to twist the mask into the logic of the commodity that it initially challenges.

### Commodifying the Universal

The mask points to what is not there in the realm of signification. It tells us that something is missing within the signifying structure, proclaiming that there is a point that escapes the control of this structure. This missing signifier is the signifier of universality—the signifier that collectivizes every subject within the social order. What we share is

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6 Locke 1988, p. 350-351

a relationship to the missing signifier, even if we have nothing else in common. This becomes foregrounded when we wear the mask. The mask thus represents a fundamental challenge to the capitalist order and its insistence on the isolation of the subject on which the system depends. The capitalist system must negotiate the mask in order to avoid having universality become apparent.

The missing signifier of universality is what capitalism, in its typical functioning, constantly endeavors to obfuscate, because a necessary absence represents an unsurpassable limit on the accumulation of capital. Capitalism disdains any such limits because they undermine the system's fundamental logic. It thus must create a mechanism that enables subjects to disavow them. It does so through the commodity, which facilitates the disavowal of absence. Rather than confronting absence in the form of the labor time that produces the commodity, we see in the commodity the possibility of overcoming lack by discovering the missing object that holds the key to our satisfaction. Commodity fetishism covers over what's missing with the promise of future completion.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx analyzes the role that the commodity and commodity fetishism plays within capitalist society. The commodity functions as a fetish that hides what is missing in capitalist relations. When we look at a commodity, we don't see the source of its value. This mystification is not a superficial effect that capitalism can do without but necessary for the commodity to perform its function. If we recognize the commodity correctly, it ceases to play its necessary role within the capitalist system. The commodity generates satisfaction for both the producer and the consumer, but at the same time, in order to do so, it hides the role that the exploitation of labor plays in this satisfaction. Due to the fetishism of commodities, Marx claims, "the definite social relation between men themselves ... assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things."<sup>7</sup> The social relation that Marx references is the exploitation of labor—the point where lack, in the form of exploited labor time, intervenes in the capitalist system and produces the excess of surplus value. Capitalism transforms lack into excess, but due to commodity fetishism, the excess emerges as if by magic.

The key to understanding how the commodity functions psychically involves linking Marx's theory of commodity fetishism with Freud's conception of fetishistic disavowal. Although Freud never references Marx's theory of fetishism when he develops his own idea of it, looking at the two theories side by side reveals an essential kinship. Freud conceives the fetish as an object that enables one to avoid confronting the lack in the Other. At the moment of confronting the Other's castration, one confronts instead a substitute object, an object that hides castration and permits the subject to bypass it.

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7 Marx 1976, p. 165.

The bypassing of castration constitutes the central appeal of fetishism in Freud's theory. In his "Fetishism" essay, Freud claims that the shortcut the fetish offers on the way to satisfaction gives the fetishist an advantage over everyone else. He writes about the fetishist, "The meaning of the fetish is not known to other people, so the fetish is not withheld from him: it is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it. What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all."<sup>8</sup> In a universe where everyone has to make do with lack in order to find satisfaction, the fetishist manages to find an object that promises complete satisfaction by facilitating the disavowal of lack.

What Freud describes as the fetish object has the same characteristics as Marx's commodity. Like the commodity, the fetish object allows the subject to avoid confronting the structural necessity of lack in the Other. The commodity promises the same nonlacking enjoyment that Freud's fetish promises. It is a vehicle for the disavowal of the Other's castration, the disavowal of the lack in the Other.

When wearing a mask, the Other's castration becomes foregrounded. For this reason, the mask works against the commodifying imperative of capitalist society. When we encounter the mask, we encounter the clear articulation of a limit. The mask indicates that the pandemic blocks the free flow of capital and interrupts the promise of an uninterrupted future satisfaction. The mask requirement signifies that something will always remain missing, that there remains a blank space within the commodity at the site of the labor time that goes into its production. In the limit that the mask poses, one can see labor made visible as an absence. Through its role as an absolute limit, the mask works as a counteragent to the commodity in capitalist society.

The capitalist system responds to the threat of the mask in two related ways. It initially praises the utility of the mask: thanks to the prophylactic power of the mask, capitalist exchange can get going again, even in the midst of the pandemic. When it functions like this, the mask's service for the capitalist economy works to offset its universalism. This is the position of conservative commentator Michael Brendan Dougherty. In an article for the *National Review*, he laments that the mask is alien to our culture but nonetheless concludes, "If masks can enable us to get back to business, we ought to be for it."<sup>9</sup> Dougherty states clearly the capitalist imperative behind his reluctant embrace of the mask. Taking up this position, arguing that the mask is good for business, is not substantively different from refusal of masks. It simply takes a more indirect route to

8 Freud 1961, p. 154.

9 Dougherty 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2020/06/22/what-the-masks-mean/#slide-1>.

the same place, a place in which the logic of the commodity triumphs.<sup>10</sup>

But capitalism's onslaught against the politics of the mask goes even further. In addition to transforming the mask into an economic tool, capitalist society turns the mask itself into a new form of commodity. Masks become a new kind of style: one can buy a mask with the design of one's favorite sports team, with the insignia of a musical group, or with a designer label. In all these cases, what's added to the mask transforms the role that it plays. When a mask becomes a commodity, its relationship to lack undergoes a fundamental shift. Rather than signifying what's missing, the commodified mask gives one the promise of completeness. We don't see what's missing but instead see the intrusion of commodity logic, a logic that fills in the nothingness that the mask indicates.

The very fact that capitalist society struggles against the mask suggests its political power. It is not simply a tool used for the sake of public health. It is a signifier of universality that we must insist on. This insistence includes the refusal to allow the logic of the commodity to overcome the signification of a fundamental absence.

### Facing the Particular

As the mask affirms universality, it also obscures the particularity of the one wearing it. The mask signifies the universal through its obstruction of the particular. One's particular identity is indicated by the face, which is what the mask blocks. The particular features of one's face—the facial qualities that give one a distinct particular identity—become elided beneath the mask. The features of the face create an image that can be recognized and that indicate one recognizes others. The particularity of the face leads to the dynamic of social recognition. Even when we aren't using facial recognition software, the face is constantly serving as the basis for social recognition.

Recognition stems from the social order, but it cannot be universal. This is because recognition always functions in a hierarchical manner. Some always gain more recognition than others. The value of recognition for those who receive it depends on those who don't receive it. Recognition serves to create distinction, to divide the social field into those who belong and those who don't, those who count and those who are worthless. The site of recognition is the face because the face indicates my particular difference, which is what people recognize.

10 In her essay in *The American Conservative*, Helen Andrews makes an inexact but nonetheless insightful attempt at finding a historical parallel between the Cold War practice of duck-and-cover and new regulations about masks. Andrews sees how the mask might itself function as a fetish, enabling us to disavow the danger of the pandemic when we believe in its protective power. This parallel not only requires masks to be totally ineffective (which they aren't) but also misses the radically different relationship to the Other inherent in duck-and-cover and in wearing a mask. Duck-and-cover is an attempt to hide the lack in the Other by providing a clear course of action that would protect us from an encounter with what cannot be mastered. See Andrews 2020.

For many thinkers, the face calls us to an obligation for the other. One sees in the face my particular vulnerability, and this vulnerability calls for one's responsibility. This is the position of Emmanuel Levinas, the great philosopher of the face. According to Levinas, the encounter with the other's face represents the ethical birthing ground for the subject. This situation calls one to an ethical responsibility for the particularity of the other as indicated through the face. As he puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, "The face to face remains an ultimate situation."<sup>11</sup> The encounter with the other's face has a priority over every encounter. It is the ultimate situation for Levinas because it provides the foundation on which our ethical comportment in the world rests.

Levinas separates the face and its ethical demand from the regime of universality. The face calls us to responsibility for the other in contrast to the claims of the universal. Rather than emerging out of universality, the face precedes the universal both chronologically and theoretically. Without the encounter with the particularity of the other's face, we have no way to get our bearings.

The mask represents a challenge to Levinas's picture of things and to the insistence on the importance of the encounter with the face. By obscuring the face, the mask creates an absence out of the presence of the face. Part of the face becomes absent within the field of vision. What we can't see in the other becomes the most important fact of the other. A blank space replaces the face and generates an absence that we encounter in the midst of the other's particularity. This gap in the other is the opening through which universality appears. The universal emerges at the point where the particular reveals itself as lacking.

It is the gap in the other, not the other's face, that makes evident our involvement in the other. What is most important to recognize is that this involvement does not concern the other as a presence but addresses what is missing within all otherness. Contra Levinas, others impact us and we impact them through what none of us have.

The hiding of the face obstructs our emotional response to the other. We are unable to see the other's emotional bearing and thus have no sense of how we should respond. The facial clues that guide our social activity disappear. We must interact without the usual subtleties that allow us to feel at ease. The encounter with a masked other is discombobulating for the subject because this encounter is deprived of the facial signals—first and foremost, the smile—that keep the social interaction going without a hitch. We confront a foreignness in our interlocutor that facial expressions—like a kind smile or even a disapproving frown—typically hide. But this is precisely the point of the mask's radicality. The mask takes us beyond the particularity of those with whom we interact.

<sup>11</sup> Levinas 1969, p. 81.

Through the mask, the other with whom we interact ceases to be a bare particular and becomes the bearer of universality. The mask is a constant hitch in the proceedings, but this hitch points toward the universal. The mask allows us to become aware that the hitch in our social interaction is not a barrier to our universal connection but the primary evidence for it. We can recognize the disruption in the social order as the site of our collective relation to universality. When we cannot recognize the other or what the other is trying to indicate to us, we confront the interruption that is universality. The mask makes this possible by hiding the particularity of the face.

### Unmasking Transgression

The fact that the mask takes us beyond the particular and to the terrain of the universal is the source of the hostility that engenders. Masks have become one of the privileged sites for cultural wars during the pandemic. The hostility that the mask arouses harbors a transgressive enjoyment.<sup>12</sup> The populist rejection of the mask unfortunately has all the enjoyment on its side. Wearing a mask helps oneself and others to survive, but refusing to wear one enables one to enjoy. In contrast to wearing a mask, refusing to wear one offers a surfeit of enjoyment. One has the thrill of transgressing the social norm propagated by the experts.

In the contemporary universe, the expert—especially the medical doctor—has become the primary source of social authority. Even if doctors do not rule nations, their authority openly trumps that of elected politicians, as the coronavirus outbreak has made clear. In most nations, leaders defer to the opinion of medical experts in calculating their response to the pandemic. But populist leaders explicitly do not defer in this way. This refusal enables supporters to enjoy transgressing the new authority. Following a populist, one obtains the enjoyment of obeying an authority added to that of transgressing an authority. This paradoxical situation maximizes enjoyment, which is why populist leaders are so popular, despite their many obvious missteps.

For a vast number of theorists, the emerging authority of the doctor represents a new and oppressive form of domination that characterizes the modern epoch. The problem with the doctor's expertise is that it involves an increasingly despotic regime of surveillance over the body. The medical expert takes the place of the priest with a concern not for eternal salvation but for salvation in this world through perfect health. Both forms of salvation have a high price—total submission to an

<sup>12</sup> In his *Seminar VII*, Lacan identifies transgression as the only possible path to enjoyment. He states, "We are, in fact, led to the point where we accept the formula that without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*." Lacan 1992, p. 177. Even if Lacan's later statements contradict this insistence on the necessary role that transgression plays for enjoyment, it nonetheless does provide one possible path.

external authority. But the doctor's authority is more despotic than that of the priest because it operates through total surveillance.

The emergence of the doctor's authority involves a transformation in the performance of medicine. This amelioration requires enhanced intrusiveness, as Michel Foucault famously documents in *Birth of the Clinic*. Foucault writes, "Having become a public, disinterested, supervised activity, medicine could improve indefinitely: in the alleviation of physical misery, it would be close to the old spiritual vocation of the Church, of which it would be a sort of lay carbon copy. To the army of priests watching over the salvation of souls would correspond that of the doctors who concern themselves with the health of bodies."<sup>13</sup> While Foucault paints the doctor as just another version of the priest, this figure is actually even more threatening than the religious figure. The priest polices the subject's activity on the lookout for transgression but tends to leave the body itself alone. The doctor goes even further, probing the body for indications of corruption that threaten the ideal of perfect health. The disciplining of the soul gives way to the disciplining of the body along with the soul.

Foucault's concern is for the new form of control and surveillance that the expert perpetuates. As the doctor replaces the priest, modernity increases its control over the bodies within its sphere of influence. It doesn't matter to Foucault whether or not the doctor actually understands real maladies or simply makes them up out of whole cloth. The point is that the doctor is a figure of surveillance that limits the domain of the body, which is why this figure earns Foucault's opprobrium.

From this perspective, the demand for universal masking functions as an extension of the expert's control over the population. Experts like Fauci, invoking concern for public health, become even more dangerous than populists like Trump. By extending the control over the body to what covers the face, Fauci and his cohort of experts restrict what bodies can do, which is the way that oppression works in the modern world, according to Foucault.

What Foucault's analysis misses are the holes in this new regime of control, holes in which the populist leader emerges in order to counter the reign of the expert. In other words, the expert's rule does not go on without a hitch in the way that Foucault imagines it. If Fauci's control was absolute, there would be no Trump. The expert operates with a fundamental blind spot, a gap in the field of knowledge where enjoyment is located. The populist leader acquires a popular appeal because this figure takes enjoyment into account, which is what the expert always fails to consider.

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault 1973, p. 32-33.

The populist leader does not simply disdain scientific expertise but uses it as a way to produce enjoyment for the populist's followers. The gap within scientific expertise is the site of enjoyment, which is what all populists exploit. By defying medical expertise (and refusing to wear a mask, for instance), the populist displays the enjoyment that derives from transgressing the rule of the expert. Even though the populist leader is actually in charge and running the country, the expert appears as the real authority whom the populist challenges. The populist exists only through the enjoyment produced from the defiance of experts.

Trump goes so far as to challenge the authority of the experts within his own government. His numerous critiques of Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx derive from the populist leader's inherent hostility to the expert. Trump cannot possibly endorse the expert's viewpoint without abandoning the source of his appeal and undermining his own ability to mobilize enjoyment for his followers, which is why he is so often at odds with people who belong to his own administration.

Refusing to wear a mask operates as a viable political position solely on the basis of the enjoyment that it produces. The position has no other compelling rationale. The appeal to liberty is flimsy since proponents do not view laws against nudity as an infringement on their personal freedom in the way that they do mask laws. They accept anti-nudity laws as well as all sorts of restrictions on liberty for the sake of the society's mores. But it is precisely this lack of a coherent rationale that gives the anti-mask position its power. The rejection of the mask does not stem from a coherent logical position but from the illogic of enjoyment. By refusing to wear a mask, one can really enjoy one's rebellion against the ruling authority in the contemporary universe—the medical doctor. The enjoyment that derives from this defiance gives it a political strength that we should not underestimate.

### **Transgressing the Mask**

The problem with the campaign in favor of the mask is that it presents the mask as purely an instrument of survival, as the vehicle for what Fauci calls "public health." According to this logic, one wears the mask to help oneself and others to survive. When painted in these terms, the position appears as bereft of enjoyment and wins followers only through social pressure or fear of punishment. Survival does not have the capacity to mobilize people on its behalf because there is nothing enjoyable about surviving. Surviving is always dolorous.

It is tempting to imagine the gesture of wearing a mask as an act of transgression in order to popularize it. If it became more transgressive to wear a mask than to refuse to wear one, the distribution of enjoyment would change. All of a sudden, the mask would have enjoyment on its side. Wearing a mask would give one the enjoyment of transgression when one considers all the people who would reprove one's decision to

do so. This seems like the best possible solution: it turns the tables on the conservative anti-maskers and reverses the enjoyment quotient in the mask debate.

But the problem with this solution is that it ensconces us in the politics of transgression, which is always a particularist politics. The politics of transgression can never be universalist because it requires an enemy who installs the norm that one transgresses. Transgression needs someone to transgress. If mask-wearing were transgressive, it would require constituting anti-maskers as the enemy one transgresses. But universalist politics can never be dependent on an enemy. This form of politics represents the refusal of enemies. Its position is that even one's political opponents share in the universal: everyone collectively doesn't have the absent universal, and this is the source of the collective bond.

Instead of theorizing the mask as a badge of transgression, we should rethink it in terms of sacrifice. Those who advocate wearing a mask should be clear that doing so is an act of sacrifice. One is giving up the visibility of one's face and the convenience of going without a mask—not a small sacrifice. This sacrifice generates an enjoyment that can compete with the transgressive enjoyment of its opponents.

Ultimately, the enjoyment of sacrifice is a more powerful form of enjoyment than that of transgression. Transgression typically becomes tedious as one constantly requires the creation of new norms to sustain the enjoyment of transgression. Sacrifice, in contrast, provides a steady form of enjoyment. One gives up the utility of the bare face for the sake of the universality of the mask. One experiences this sacrifice on a daily basis and receives the enjoyment that it produces.

Undoubtedly, the time will come when we will throw away our masks or perhaps just pack them away until the next pandemic. But what we should retain as we abandon our masks is the encounter that the mask facilitates. We should treat the unmasked face as if it were masked, looking at the face not as an isolated particularity but as a site harboring the missing signifier of universality. By looking at the naked face as if it were masked, we see what is not there, not just what is. This is the attitude that the mask encourages. When we look at the mask, we must see that there is nothing beneath it.

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