

COVID-19 and the Long Revolution

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Recent events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed deeply embedded structural inequities within the United States, triggering national dialogues around institutional racism, carcerality, and the logic of neoliberalism. While our reckoning with these structures continues to unfold and remix in unpredictable ways, we offer a theoretical lens for understanding this moment. Using the concept of *liminality*, we argue that a long revolution has been activated through a state of suspended order; specifically, with our routines disrupted to mitigate fallout from COVID-19, we have been afforded limited space for recognizing these structures and the linkages among them. Here, we engage with *carceral capitalism* to make sense of present conditions. As we move through the long *durée*, forging new structures and patterns, it is crucial to remember that which we must abandon: the systems and tools of subjugation that remain inconsistent with how we live and, more importantly, how we want to live.

Keywords: liminality, carceral capitalism, revolution, COVID-19

Our world has been swiftly transformed by an imperceptible threat: a global pandemic triggered by the novel coronavirus and COVID-19, the erratic disease it causes. The medical complexity of the issue has flummoxed science, prompted stay-at-home orders and social distancing protocols, and revealed new, perilous depths of our political and ideological rifts. Most importantly, it has further exposed chronic, untended disparities among our most vulnerable populations.

During the months-long struggle to adapt and apprehend the invisible, our frames of reference are increasingly and often exclusively anchored by mediated representations. These frames, with all their flaws and imperfections, have nonetheless granted space and visibility for the otherwise nameless or unimaginable: reports of Rikers Island inmates digging mass graves on Hart Island for indigent COVID-19 victims from New York City (Darby, 2020); the disproportionate transmission and fatality rates among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities (Akee, 2020; Ellis, 2020); the unchecked augmentation of police surveillance technologies (e.g., using facial recognition software; Schoolov, 2020); burgeoning privacy concerns for Big Tech contact tracing initiatives using smartphone data, GPS, and Bluetooth (Browne, 2020); and the enduring legacy of slavery and systemic racism within the United States, triggered by the unabated murders of Black people by police (Worland, 2020). Many are beginning to see the forest for the trees; that these otherwise distinct, isolated phenomena are actually intimately connected and always have been. It would seem that we have entered the season of long overdue reckonings.

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In a ceaseless and frenetic unfolding of events during a time already plagued by uncertainty, we find ourselves ensnared in a state of suspended order; one where, all at once, anything and nothing seems possible. Some have described this moment as “The Cool Zone”—a period of time that will captivate historians for its tragedy and/or, more optimistically, its perseverance; a moment in history that is *cool* to read about (Jackson, 2020). World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Arab Spring uprisings, and other decisive moments in history are looked back on with bewilderment, grief, or reverence; each for pushing the limits of possibility and clarifying our collective commitments and values. But living through these moments often lacks the clarity of hindsight. In this article, we provide a framework for interpreting the deep changes and growing pains we are undergoing as a society. Epistemological inquiry has analyzed social crises of that past. We must find ways to allow the knowledge we have amassed in the long *durée* of humanity to afford us comfort, courage, and wisdom.

The Long *Durée*

In ways both obvious and unexpected, long shadows are being cast in history: As we retreat inward to combat an invisible, viral adversary, we simultaneously find ourselves contending—perhaps more intently than ever—with endemic social disparities, (re)animated and (re)invigorated through enhanced visibilities. Corresponding with the permutations of vision described by Orit Halpern (2015) in *Beautiful Data*, this mediated crisis—constituted through historically situated modes of visibility—has made knowable particular forms and exercises of power that seldom penetrate our collective consciousness. While the ability to see traverses history, *what* is seen and *how* are historically contingent products of “historical, technical, social, physical, and environmental conditions that shape the experience of ‘seeing’” (Halpern, 2015, p. 23). In other words, the long duration; a lasting span of time across which social process and structure evolve (Figure 1). Our ability to exist within the long *durée* will enable us to move forward without forgetting to learn from our past.

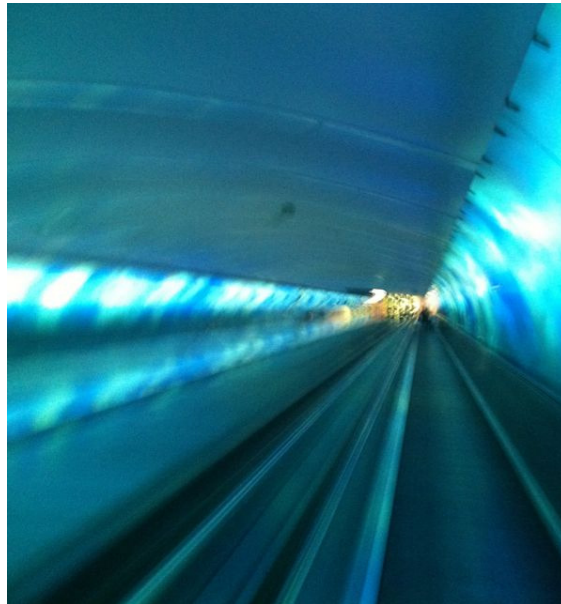


Figure 1. Liminality and the long durée.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has impelled a state of *liminality*, “of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction” (Thomassen, 2014, p. 1). Similar to Arundhati Roy’s (2020) notion of the pandemic as a portal—a doorway from one world to the next, through which we are forced to reconcile and transcend our past—liminality represents an opportunity for renewal, for seeing the world anew. It is impossible to address any process of long duration and social change without invoking a proper understanding of liminality. In the course of liminal, or transitional, stages, our tools, ourselves, and the conditions under which we navigate an increasing number of uncertainties coalesce, much like they have done now. As a result, both our capacities and faculties of/for visuality have generated new possibilities for agency and resistance; we have been granted precious space (and time) for witnessing—for “*bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen” (Oliver, 2001, p. 16, emphasis in original). At stake is understanding these emergent visibilities, these forms of power, and the opportunities (and constraints) for plural reflexivity and reimagination they present. It is essential that we understand what we are going through as the emergence of change. All too often, we are driven to internalize it as a painful process representing one of humanity’s lowest points. We argue that this is one of humanity’s most trying and challenging states. If we interpret what we are going through as liminal, we will be able to use it to transition forward.

¹ Images are from the authors’ personal collections. We use visual material in an evocative manner, to complement and underscore notions of stasis and change, subversion and renewal.

Liminality and Uneasy Transitions

In *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner (1969/1991) revives (from Arnold van Gennep) the condition of liminality. It contains entities and ritual processes, or rites, that characterize states of transition. During occasions of collectively experienced change or crisis, the prevailing structure and order of society are suspended. Thomassen (2014) terms this phase “macro-liminality” (p. 94), during which unstructured social bonds—once marred by hierarchy—begin to emerge, giving rise to what Turner defines as *communitas*. By disrupting and reimagining traditional social boundaries, the experience of *communitas* stands in as a previously unrecognized universality of the human condition. For Turner (1969/1991), “*communitas* emerges where social structure is not” (p. 126), and through its manifestation, new social structures, patterns of understanding, and fellowships may begin to take shape. In other words, when social structures become liquid, or liminal, and less able to sustain our common bonds, a shared sense of *communitas* helps us preserve our human bonds to move forward. Like this, *communitas* shares with a Deleuzian conception of power (*puissance*)—a range of potential, or capacity, to form affective and solidaric unities and collectively act—that activates during ruptures in external power relations, as with moments of liminality (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). When the tacit assumptions of our existing social and political order are confronted, we may access this “collective effervescence” and create new order (Thomassen, 2014, p. 196); or, in the words of Arundhati Roy (2020), pass through the gateway from one world to another, ready to fight for the changes we so desire.

Liminality is a term that we seldom use beyond the academic sphere. Yet it is a stage that we all go through, as individuals, but also as members of the societies we populate. Liminality is an essential condition for social change. As described by Turner (1969/1991), it introduces an effervescent, long moment of the in-between; it characterizes the short time between the fall of one state of being and the emergence of a new status quo. During the liminal stage, or the long *durée*, as we refer to it—so as to emphasize the brevity and the gravitas of this moment—a state of heterarchy emerges. It is common to observe fluctuations in power, agency, and pathways to change, as windows of opportunity emerge. The liminal moment is recognized frequently in the arts and letters, as it ushers in new ways of thinking. In the sciences, it introduces paradigmatic shifts. But these transitions are only capable by affording liminality; by enabling that stage where all parties have equal access to agency, so that in the sciences, for instance, relativity can overthrow prevailing ways of interpreting the world. Or in the arts, how we define a painting or sculpture is reassessed.



Figure 2. Engaging the liminal.

Liminal moments, by definition, precede revolutionary cycles. They do not guarantee the success of a social, cultural, political, economic, or structural revolution. But they do enable the conversation to happen (Figure 2). They provide access to all actors. The Arab Spring uprisings, which spread across countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa from 2010 to 2012, rightly illustrate these conditions. In response to harsh economic conditions, authoritarianism, and exploitation in the region, prodemocratic revolutions forced regime changes in several countries. Though their success remains uncertain—as power vacuums, large-scale conflicts, and counterrevolutions ensued throughout the region—the social bonds on display through these demonstrations were forged during a liminal state of social and political instability. Liminality fostered a collective yearning to recreate political structures across the Arab world. You might recognize, from the language we use, that we are presently in the midst of such a liminal long moment. Time feels like it is moving extremely fast and painfully slow at the same time. This is a defining characteristic of liminality—the sensation of acceleration and simultaneous impression that the world is on pause. This is how the liminal moment emerges. We are moving through space and time tropes that appear frozen. We are fluid and static at once.

Fluid and Static: Liminality and Carceral Capitalism

The COVID-19 condition has intensified slow living in a world that only knows fast. And our media typically oversimplify conversations that have to be complex. They produce narratives that introduce plot twists, villains and heroes, happy and sad endings. We often pick up this discourse and reproduce it in our opinionated conversations on social media. Together with our media and our politicians, we become entrapped in debates that pit capitalism versus socialism, left versus right, good versus bad. We talk, live, and breathe in a world of civic extremes. Every gesture must fit one of our binaries. Polarization is

inescapable when we move in linear directions demarcated by left and right. We create, reinforce, and reproduce the binaries that divide us.

Take, for example, the construction and disruption of the autonomous zone in Seattle (Abrams, 2020). We rush to take a position on that: Is it good or bad? Left or right? Capitalist or socialist? What do these words even mean anymore? What if it is neither? Rather than reproducing stale political scripts, gestures like the autonomous zone of Seattle are meant to exist in our imaginations. They are intended as opportunities to rethink, to reimagine. So many mediated depictions of the zone, and subsequent conversations, focused on whether this model was sustainable, for instance. What a useless conversation that was. The point is not whether it is sustainable. The point, rather, is that the manner in which we police, surveil, and govern is not compatible with how we live. These systems were invented in centuries past and no longer serve our democracies. And yet we bend new technologies to fit the mold of centuries past. To support old habits and even older structures.

Static and fluid present another set of polar opposites. We find comfort in the seeming permanence of stasis. We are disrupted by the instability liquid states introduce. We are socialized to understand stasis and change as opposite. And yet change is often embedded within imbricated layers of uncertainty. And uncertainty is the looming threat to the human condition. We do not handle uncertainty well, and neither do the things that we create. Our technologies do not handle uncertainty well. Our media struggle with reporting uncertainty. Our financial markets are particularly volatile to uncertainty. Our psyche resists uncertainty, even though it is only when we embrace uncertainty that we are able to feel free.

There are many conditions of our own making that reinforce and reproduce our struggle with uncertainty. We want to focus on one in particular, in this article, because we find that in this iteration of our human history, in this long moment of change, it is the one that is most relevant. If we are to escape forward from the liminal into the status quo that awaits, we must understand the condition of *carceral capitalism*—the prevailing mode of social and economic organization that helps us understand and explain many recent (and historical) developments vis-à-vis racism, carcerality, and neoliberalism, including those introduced earlier.

The Moment After Carceral Capitalism

Recent struggles and displays of resistance, fostered through the liminal long moment, convey a sense of immediacy, exposing how the hard structures of capitalism reproduce long-standing inequalities. We employ an economic system developed centuries ago to run societies that look very different today. Not only do we apply a barely postmedieval economic logic to postmillennial markets, we utilize with a religiously observed adherence to its original logic. Rather than softening capitalist structures and making room for them to respond to social change, we *harden them*, making them nonresponsive to change and therefore even more susceptible to uncertainty. Over against yawning social inequities in the United States, we saw widespread political and economic neoliberalization, which continues to encroach on and shape the conditions our public institutions exist to manage (e.g., Harvey, 2007).

Yet capitalism thrives on inequalities. Without inequalities, markets become quiet. Competition among equals is boring, as capitalism has conditioned us to believe: No one wants to bet on a race where everyone finishes first. Jackie Wang (2018) expands on the foundations of racial capitalism to describe a contemporary capitalist condition which she terms *carceral capitalism*. In this state, governance takes on a parasitic form; it feeds on the current state of affairs, further binging on previously appropriated cycles of inequality. Parasitic governance, per Wang, recycles and proliferates five primary techniques: financial states of exception, automated processing, extraction and looting, confinement, and gratuitous violence. The present long moment is filled with numerous illustrations of these five techniques. To move forward, we must understand what we need to move away from. We discuss carceral capitalism and its interlocking modalities because they represent what we must part ways with to make the liminal moment meaningful. So, what exactly is it that we are referring to?

Carceral capitalism may be understood as next stage, advanced racial capitalism. As evidenced through cases of predatory lending and techniques of parasitic governance, mass incarceration and concentrated poverty (particularly within the U.S. context) are, *by design*, positioned to satisfy the imperatives of racial capitalism—succinctly defined by Leong (2013) as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” (p. 2152; see also Robinson, 2000); though, at its core, capitalism *is* racial capitalism. Like this, carceral capitalism subsists by virtue of its effectiveness in exploiting racism as the enshrinement of inequality that capitalism (writ large) requires (Melamed, 2015).

Rather than emphasizing inequitable economic conditions vis-à-vis racial politics and structures, Wang (2018) considers the modes of governance and racial economic practices that inform state carceral techniques. Predatory lending—the prevailing practice in racial economics—includes forms of bad-faith credit² designed to result in repossession, default, and/or foreclosure. According to Wang, these practices are inherently racialized and discriminatory, as evidenced through recent settlements by J.P. Morgan and Wells Fargo for targeting Black and Latinx folks with higher interest mortgage loans than White people within the same income brackets. Within the framework of carceral capitalism, predatory lending may be understood as “a form of social exclusion that operates via the inclusion of marginalized populations as borrowers” (Wang, 2018, p. 70). Inclusion begets further social exclusion.

Beyond racial economic practices, Wang (2018) positions parasitic governance as another integral component of carceral capitalism, which includes interlocking mechanisms of financial extraction via government entities. First, financial states of exception refer to authorized government or municipal retrenchments in response to debt crises, and the consequences these “emergency” budget adjustments produce. For example, in response to the nascent financial crisis in Flint, Michigan, former Governor Rick Snyder deployed emergency financial managers to oversee city finances in 2011. Among other efforts to reduce costs, Wang explains, officials and emergency managers switched the city water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River despite lacking proper infrastructure to treat the water. As a result, the pipes became corroded and exposed Flint residents—more than 50% of whom are Black—to toxic levels of lead. While the Flint Water Crisis serves as an extreme case of retrenchment, or financialization, it demonstrates the disproportionate

² Examples include subprime mortgages and targeted high-interest loans with low introductory, or “hook,” rates that ultimately expire (e.g., car loans, student loans, payday loans).

vulnerability to parasitic governance faced by Black communities. We have already seen processes of financialization emerging in response to the economic fallout of COVID-19, including sweeping state and municipal budget cuts, layoffs for public-sector employees, and disruptions to essential public services and programs. While federal pandemic relief has temporarily averted more aggressive retrenchment measures, officials have started weighing the closure of public libraries, drug treatment centers, and recreational areas to offset declining revenues (Cohen, 2020), which would ultimately incur disparate impact for neighborhoods and communities already struggling economically.

Automation—the second technique of parasitic governance detailed by Wang (2018)—includes various automated processes whereby government bodies implement software or technical systems to extract revenue from the public, such as the automated ticketing of drivers via traffic-light cameras. Given the discourses of objectivity/neutrality surrounding such systems, however, “the social consequences of automated processing are difficult to make legible and identify” as they “fail to register as scandals” (Wang, 2018, p. 76). Related to automated processing are methods of domestic extraction and looting, where, in an effort to satisfy private creditors, government bodies both reduce social services *and* increase civic fines and fees. According to Wang, this process typically manifests in municipal governments through law enforcement and the criminal justice system, which loot Black residents: “The looting persists because residents in these zones have access to neither ‘good-faith’ credit nor the material means to escape exposure to predation” (p. 80). Like this, residents are concentrated and economically locked into these jurisdictions through compounding historical and structural conditions, thereby determining, in part, the distribution of life chances.



Figure 3. Visualizing exclusion via inclusion.

Unlike the previous three techniques of parasitic governance (financialization, automated processing, and extraction), which necessarily exclude via *inclusion* (Figure 3), confinement and gratuitous violence exclude respectively via “civic and actual death” (Wang, 2018, p. 80). As it concerns carceral capitalism, the notion of confinement denotes the racialized welfare, penal, and debt states, which, as Wang (2018) argues, cannot be explained solely through the lens of political economy: mass incarceration and concentrated poverty are *not* necessitated through financial motives alone, but instead also depend on anti-Black racism and the ideological discourses of neoliberalism (e.g., poverty as moral failure, meritocracy). Indeed, as Elizabeth Hinton (2016) demonstrates, the widespread neoliberal policy changes that expanded and modernized the U.S. carceral state (i.e., divestment in social welfare programs/entitlements and investment in law enforcement, surveillance, and the penal system) were neither impartial nor inevitable. Rather, administrative and juridical efforts to merge social welfare and law enforcement programs—beginning in the 1960s around the “punitive turn”—were guided by racist understandings of Black criminality and poverty as pathological (e.g., “urban civil disorder,” the 1965 Moynihan Report); as the result of individual and/or cultural deficits, thereby legitimating the tacit, neoliberal bargain of individual over collective (Harvey, 2007; Hinton, 2016).

Finally, gratuitous violence characterizes the disposability and exploitability of Black racialization, where incidents of anti-Black violence or death are understood in isolation from their systemic or institutional roots. So, occasions where an individual overtly discriminates against or harms a person of color may be recognized as racism to “conscientious persons,” but the racism underlying the mass incarceration of Black people through the War on Drugs remains largely invisible as such (Wang, 2018, p. 266). Violence is “gratuitous” because its perceptibility often fails to evoke the historical and structural conditions that enable racialized social and physical death; and when made visible, these conditions still fail to arouse sympathy or outrage. Taken together, the techniques of predatory lending and parasitic governance proffered by Wang (2018) demonstrate the extent to which U.S. carcerality and its corresponding economic (social and political) inequities are guided by, and satisfy, the imperatives of racial capitalism. Like this, carceral capitalism provides a critical analytic through which institutional processes of exploitation, expropriation, confinement, and annihilation become operable through racialization.

Across the political spectrum, it is these racialized structures and their outward-facing extensions that have recently come into focus—from law enforcement and policing, to carceral technologies, to the law itself—granting renewed optimism and visibility for the aspirations of abolition and reform (Coleman, 2020). In recent history, demands to abolish and/or defund the police have never been clearer, nor has support for racial equity—and the acknowledgment of enduring racial inequity—been so broad. And while these perceptual shifts have been steadily underway for years, as Ibram X. Kendi (2020) recently wrote in an article for *The Atlantic*, “we are [currently] living in the midst of an anti-racist revolution” (para. 10).

For many reasons and in many ways, a reorientation of our collective consciousness has been set in motion, and through this grander dialogue—amid the temporary suspension of order—we have been permitted to rethink the roles, institutions, and disciplinary functions of the state. A window of opportunity for change has opened up through conditions that are painful, exposing the visible yet often unverifiable structures that promulgate mass incarceration and the diffuse racial projects that sustain them (Omi & Winant, 1994). It behooves us to take advantage of this liminal opening, use technology to stretch time, and collaborate in ways that advance social change. Change is gradual and the revolution will be long. No impactful transition is easy. We must manage to turn fleeting seconds of connection into long moments of (r)evolution.

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd—a 46-year-old Black man—was murdered by Minneapolis police after allegedly purchasing cigarettes from a convenience store with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Video footage of Floyd dying under the knee of officer Derek Chauvin was shared widely, galvanizing protests and demands for justice, for change. And despite the reprehensible familiarity of Floyd’s death, something rang both similar and different this time: Calls to action erupted, along with the acknowledgment and condemnation of an unjust racial order. Yet an end to gratuitous police violence and the racial animus it springs from was no longer enough, per the demands of recent protests; and, historically, it has *never* been enough. Now, attention has shifted toward the logics, practices, and technologies of carcerality and the industrial complexes that govern them (Hamid, 2020). This most visual and disturbing result of anti-Black state violence has revealed—albeit for those unmarked by these conditions—the more discrete consequences of neoliberalism.

Still, it is important to remember that the undoing of injustice is complex. “The connections between our lives and the generalized atmosphere of violence,” Wang (2018) explains, “is submerged in a complex web of institutions, structures, and economic relations that legalize, normalize, legitimize, and—above all—are constituted by this repetition of violence” (p. 287). It is not just our imbricated structures of injustice that require unraveling and doing over; it is our own psyches that direct us to react in ways that imprint avenues for inequality into our design of carceral infrastructures and technologies. As Audre Lorde, quoted by Kendi (2019) in *How to Be an Antiracist*, once said,

We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. (p. 23)

With the liminal long moment, however, comes the experience of *communitas*—the flattening of social structure and distance that would emphasize rather than minimize human differences (Thomassen, 2014).

Whether through peaceful acts or violent destruction, *communitas* reflects an unveiling of structurally conditioned ambivalence toward the “Other”; a renewal of our ethics, foregrounded by the recognition of “a deeply bonded human collectivity” (Thomassen, 2014, p. 84). For Turner (1969/1991), *communitas* stands in contrast to structure, to the “hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions” (p. 96) that persist beyond the liminal period. During moments of political revolution, *communitas* often emerges through the affective bonds of mass mobilization—here, as the morality and power of our political (read: *parasitic*) institutions are called into question, so too are the social boundaries they catalyze.

As we are inundated with cases of anti-Black policing and violence in a moment already defined by systemic failures, and as demands for justice are consistently ignored by adjudicating institutions, we are, perhaps, beginning to forge new patterns of connection; for “relating across our human differences as equals,” as Lorde might see it (as cited in Kendi, 2019, p. 23). Evidence of the differential impact of carceral practices—including gratuitous police violence, incarceration, financialization, and so on—within Black communities has been well-documented. Yet these realities are seldom enough to disabuse White people of the postracial mythos and faith in (color)blind justice. But with the suspension of order, where a return to “normal” grows increasingly improbable—and, arguably, undesirable—perhaps America is finally ready to face head-on its inequities, injustices, and the seedbed of racism from which these patterns grew.

At present, we live in the cloud. We breathe, meet, and share in the space previously occupied by our files. We convene in spaces mediated by the data processing and storage facilities our structures of carceral capitalism have enabled. It is a liminal place of being. It is also a liminal state of being. It will not last indefinitely, nor will we stay in the cloud forever. Our revolutions will evolve on all platforms that foster *communitas*, both on and off the cloud. They will evolve, pause, restart, stop, continue, and be reimagined. The revolutions will be long. We may not always be sure of where it is we are headed—that is okay and it is part of the appeal. But our revolutions can *only* be meaningful if we have a shared understanding of what it is we are walking away from and why.

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