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Virus Interruptus: An Arendtian Exploration of Political World Building in Pandemic Times

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Virus Interruptus: An Arendtian Exploration of Political World-building in Pandemic Times

ABSTRACT

Building upon a series of blog posts and conversations, two feminist scholars explore how political community, trust, responsibility, and solidarity are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore the ways in which we can engage in political world-building during pandemic times through the work of Hannah Arendt. Following Arendt's notion of the world as the space for human togetherness, we ask: how can we respond to COVID-19's interruptions to the familiarity of daily life and our relationship to public space? By extending relational accounts of public health and organizational ethics, we critique a narrow view of solidarity that focuses on individual compliance with public health directives. Instead, we argue that solidarity involves addressing structural inequities, both within public health and our wider community. Finally, we suggest possibilities for political world-building by considering how new forms of human togetherness might emerge as we forge a collective "new normal."

Keywords: Arendt, political world-building, Covid-19, solidarity

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Over the weekend of International Women’s Day, we were together at a conference in Southwestern Ontario on “Rethinking Responses to Political Crisis and Collapse.” This conference focused on four women: Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil, and took place prior to the coronavirus becoming a crisis (at least, a publicly-recognized one) in North America. At this point, Italy was already in lock down. Europeans were beginning to refrain from traveling abroad, although there were some participants from Europe who attended the conference. People were encouraged to bump elbows rather than shake hands, but “social distancing” was not yet a familiar term. And no-one knew anything about what would become our “new normal.” In many respects, we remain unsure what the “new normal” is and will become.

In this paper, building upon an exchange of views that has resulted from blog posts and conversations with each other, we examine how political community, trust, responsibility, and solidarity are affected by the new normal brought into appearance by the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore how we can engage in political world-building during pandemic times through the work of Hannah Arendt. Following her notion of viewing the world as the space for human togetherness, we ask: how can we respond to COVID-19’s interruptions to the familiarity of daily life and our relationship to public space? We argue that solidarity involves addressing structural inequities, within organizations, public health institutions, and the wider community. Finally, we suggest possibilities for political world-building by considering how new forms of human togetherness might emerge as we forge a collective “new normal.”

Virus Interruptus

I remember that you asked a question during a talk at the aforementioned conference about the newness of the coronavirus.¹ You framed your question by contrast with the twentieth-century political theorist Hannah Arendt, who characterizes political action as beginning something new in the world that is boundless, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. For Arendt (1958), action, as the human capacity to initiate new beginnings, is the fundamental component of human freedom. Action, which is rooted in what she (1958) calls “natality,” has a potential to interrupt the status quo, since it is not limited by the intentions or goals of the actor. Once an action is initiated, anything can happen. The coronavirus exhibits some features of action but, of course, is not an actor and not free in the Arendtian sense of those terms. What made you ask this question?

Something that the speaker said, or maybe it was something he didn't say, made me think about the coronavirus in terms of Bruno Latour's notion of actant, that is, an act that changes our world in unpredictable ways. And I remember thinking what might Hannah say about our new normal?

Arendt's philosophical approach might best be described as an attempt to understand the diversity of human experiences, especially when people are confronted with new phenomena (e.g., totalitarianism, the atom bomb). She (1958; 1961) often describes her writing as an exercise in thinking; that is, as an attempt to understand the meaningfulness of events or “crises” that cause us to question familiar experiences. The virus has certainly interrupted our

¹ Most of this paper is written together, and uses the pronoun “we” to reflect the shared views of the authors. We also include some dialogical dimensions as well. When “I” is used and the font is not in italics, the speaker is author 2. When “I” is used and the text is in italics, the speaker is author 1.

unreflective assumptions about the world, but it also has revealed opportunities for societies to step up and challenge societal ideas about business as usual. COVID-19 has raised questions about how members of a political community relate to public space and build a world together in these uncertain and unfamiliar times. Arendt (1958) describes “the world” as the space of human togetherness, contending:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men [sic] at the same time (p. 52).

As the space for human togetherness, the world is not only comprised of diverse peoples and organizations, it is also concerned with how we, as members of a political community, shape the public space we share. For her, politics is not just about organizing society, it is about our experience of shaping the world together. How do we engage in political world-building in pandemic times?

“Virus interruptus” has disrupted the familiarity of our world in so many ways. In virtually all diverse Western countries, many public spaces have been closed and movement, both domestically and internationally, is restricted. For example, both of us are Canadian immigrants with family who live in other countries (England, USA) whom we cannot visit due to travel restrictions. In Canada, since mid-March, we have been unable to gather together with friends, neighbours, loved ones, coworkers, or even strangers. And this has led to feelings of lack, or missing out. More than I miss the weekly happy hour with colleagues, I also miss the ease of walking into a crowded grocery store to buy a simple item that I forgot I needed to prepare a meal. For those less privileged, however, the unfamiliarity of the public realm is less about feelings of loss, and more about feelings of potential danger. Food service, grocery, and

warehouse workers might not have thought about their jobs as dangerous prior to their occupations becoming deemed essential work.

For the last few months, I have started my mornings by looking at the Johns Hopkins website that registers numbers of those affected by COVID-19 in different countries. I am fascinated by this data tracking. I have been wondering why I find it fascinating; then I read Latour's (2020) blog post on COVID-19 in which he notes that we live in a society obsessed by statistics. I guess I am now one of the obsessed.

As well as my new-found obsession with statistical data, a fact that my quantitative colleagues might well find amusing given my previous disdain for statistics, I am concerned with my own culpability in passively watching the numbers rise. I am not sure why I think of myself as culpable; perhaps it relates to the guilt I feel in being one of the lucky ones who is able to work from home unlike my brother in England, for example, who has to go to work each day to open up a school. This school has remained open, since it is for the children of health care workers. One day, my brother told me his colleague came to work sick. I have the virus, this man said. Then go home, my brother replied. The man tossed his keys to my brother who automatically put out his hands to catch the keys. And this is how the virus spreads from people to things to people.

Latour (2020) contends that, instead of acknowledging links between human actions, climate change, and the virus, we continue to think in nineteenth-century biopolitical terms that privilege statistical ways of thinking about the world. Speaking about biopolitics in relation to the coronavirus, in late February, Giorgio Agamben (2020) provocatively claimed that the virus was no more serious than the seasonal flu. His comment was challenged quickly, and the comparison he drew between the coronavirus and the flu has proven to be false. But Agamben's political concern was about government regulation of public and private life. Justified in the

name of public health, he viewed the kinds of restrictions imposed by the Italian government to be an extension of state power that will not disappear when the pandemic ends. In response, Roberto Esposito (2020) suggests that Agamben's argument proceeds too quickly, and fails to distinguish the ways in which government control has been increasing slowly with the need to respond quickly to a pandemic that could kill an unfathomable number of people. According to Esposito, to talk of "risks to democracy" due to isolation protocols is misplaced - these protocols are about saving lives and supporting healthcare infrastructure.

Conversely, drawing on Foucault and other theorists of biopolitics, Paul B. Preciado (2020) warns that the pandemic may legitimize the extension of state power. Some governments have justified extreme measures to use technological and bio-surveillance tools in the name of flattening the curve and saving lives. Like Agamben, he suggests it is naive to think that these measures will cease post-pandemic. Further, as Yu Ai (2020) argues, in relation to China's use of digital surveillance and the disproportionate targeting of women as 'bad citizens' during the pandemic, these measures are often gendered, reinforcing patriarchal and other forms of power.

Despite Esposito's optimism and Agamben's dubious comparison between coronavirus and the seasonal flu, governmental responses to COVID-19 reveal fractures in the ways in which we relate to each other. According to American political thinker, Roger Berkowitz (2020a), people should be concerned about how physical life gets prioritized over political life during the pandemic. He draws on Arendt's critique that politics has become concerned with physical survival over the world, that is, the space in which humans speak and act together. For Berkowitz, coronavirus changes how we relate to others in the name of preserving life. As someone living in New York and infected by the virus, he knows the costs of the virus only too well (2020b). In most parts of North America, since late March, these concerns have only

intensified; the result of which has been the proliferation of public health and other directives.

At the beginning of the stay-at-home directives, many people lamented the loss of having dinner with family and friends. But now families experience the pain of grieving for loved ones without the ability to visit them in long-term care homes or in hospitals, or even to mourn them at a funeral. Lynne F. Baxter (2020) has illustrated how much caring for the elderly is a feminist issue, both personally and politically. Across the world, we see how those in care homes have suffered greatly from the lack of adequate care, despite the best of intentions from carers who are often women who are underpaid and overworked in an extremely demanding job.

Returning to Berkowitz, he invites us to reflect upon what it means for human relationships when physical life becomes privileged. Berkowitz (2020a) states that “the near total shutdown of social, political, and public life are also consequences of our increasing inability to value political and spiritual facets of human life.” Furthermore, feminist scholars, such as Ai (2000), Baxter (2000), and Enloe (2000) encourage us to think about how issues of gender and power can be obscured by political discussions on the virus. Cynthia Enloe (2020), for example, contends that one of the problems with the language used by politicians to describe COVID-19 is its militaristic overtones. This militarism serves not only to masculinize the pandemic, but also ignores how two thirds of the workers most affected across the globe are women (Enloe, 2020). What is necessary, she maintains, is the demilitarizing of language in favour of language that emphasizes social solidarity. Perhaps these considerations might be a way to think about “world-building.” Specifically, in the wake of such a threat to physical life, how do we think about our social and political togetherness? If there is a risk to democracy in Berkowitz’s view, it is that as citizens and residents we will become complacent with the loss of political community. Drawing on feminist scholarship, we suggest an additional risk is that democracy may be undermined if

we do not change the system in ways to make political togetherness more inclusive.

It is not so much complacency I am concerned about but unethical action, and a seeming lack of care on the part of some politicians. Our leaders are failing us, and that failure leads not to mass complacency but contempt on the part of others. There is amongst too many senior politicians a seeming cult of exceptionalism, whereby what I tell you to do is different to how I choose to act. In the US, for example, everyone in the White House wears masks except for the President. In Ontario, Canada, the Premier tells people they must stay home then he invites his daughters over to celebrate Mother's Day. Alongside a lack of truthfulness, there is an apparent ethical void amongst some of our leaders. Why should we follow what they say when they do not?

Trust and Obedience in Pandemic Times

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt (2003a) contends that the term obedience is a misnomer; yet that misnomer is at the heart of the political system of rulers and ruled. She writes that, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, every body politic has consisted of rulers and ruled, the former give out orders while the latter obey those dictates. But, Arendt argues, it is wrong to suggest that adults obey leaders, and merely go along with whatever is asked. Rather what a reasonable adult does is offer up their consent. She (2003a) maintains that the word obedience should be stricken from our language, arguing “[m]uch would be gained if we could eliminate this pernicious word “obedience” from our vocabulary of moral and political thought” (p. 48). Living in the aftermath of The Second World War, and the horrors of the Shoah, it is not surprising that Arendt would make this claim. But, in this time of fear caused by the virus, does obedience have any place?

Maybe we are at a time when it is necessary to be compliant, and to follow what public

health officials say is in our collective interest. This can be difficult when the public does not have much information. It took Ontario until early April to release models about social distancing protocols and their effects. What I am getting at here is that it is responsible to obey the law, which strictly speaking is not a law but a strongly-suggested request. In any event, I need to feel able to trust that politicians are acting in my best interests.

Indeed, we might articulate the concerns about government regulation in terms of trust. When we comply with government (or public health directives), we often presume that our governments are concerned with flattening the curve, and with saving lives. But government directives and public health guidelines are not always aligned. In addition to your questions about why Ontario took so long to release models, Baxter (2020) relates how with the Scottish government's reporting on deaths in seniors' homes, information was slow to be shared with the public (p. 6). A lack of political transparency serves to erode public trust.

But, this trust is not just about politicians; it is also about trusting our neighbours. Yet we have all seen people not practicing social distancing which, health officials tell us, is one important way to combat the virus. Many countries have first asked and then ordered their citizens to remain in their homes. Here, in Canada, it seems a good thing to do what we are told, and comply with the public health officials' orders, but what if this compliance is a mistake? Or rather, when does compliance turn into obedience? What would Arendt say in such a crisis? She might argue that such unthinking obedience negates our responsibility to judge for ourselves (Gardiner, 2018). But would Arendt keep to her idea that for adults to obey is ludicrous or would she perhaps consider that, upon reflection, there may be times where obedience to some government edicts is in the best interests of the public realm?

It seems to us that there are times when, for the health of the public sphere and those who

act within it, it is necessary to comply with government decrees. And yet such compliance raises ethical issues about how much compliance is too much. Self-isolation means those of us deemed non-essential workers stay in our homes, and stay away from our friends and family that do not live with us--if we are privileged enough for this to be a possibility. But are we thinking for ourselves when we decide to comply with government and medical requests to self isolate? Or does such self-isolation represent a lack of thought on our part, a willingness to go along with what we are being told, without spending enough time reflecting upon whether what we are both told is the right thing to do?

I don't know the answer to that question; what I do know is that I feel very uncomfortable with the introduction of snitch lines in my city to call out anyone who is not complying.

Reporting on neighbours who do not "toe the line" may seem like our civic responsibility. But who is to say that those snitch lines will not be used in other ways at other times? And will some groups of people be targeted more than others? Which raises the question: what is our personal responsibility in a democracy? Is it different in a pandemic?

Responsibility and Solidarity

Rather than obedience to the state, Simona Forti (2020) describes voluntary self-isolation as an act of solidarity. This relational emphasis is not only important for our political community, it is also important to think about organizational ethics in a relational and embodied way (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015). The political and the organizational come together in thinking about public health ethics. Similar to Forti, health journalists (Picard 2020) and bioethicists (Baylis 2020) urge us to think of physical distancing, staying at home, and wearing non-medical masks as expressions of solidarity. According to feminist bioethicists Nuala P. Kenny, Susan Sherwin, and Françoise Baylis (2010), "pandemic ethics" has been defined narrowly as a

personal health care issue rather than broadly as global public health, and has focused on the traditional bioethical pillar of personal autonomy. However, an individualistic approach will not adequately conceptualize or address public health goals.

As a corrective, Kenny, Sherwin, and Baylis articulate a relational public health ethics, grounded in the recognition that individuals are embedded in social and political communities. Autonomy, justice, and solidarity need to be envisioned through a relational lens, one that is cognizant of gender and other intersectional aspects of identity. Responsibility during a pandemic, then, does not only require trust between people and the government, it also requires us to consider our experience with one other in our political communities. Snitch lines suggest that we are fearful of our neighbours, rather than “in this together,” a phrase we often hear in public media. The “us” of the political community is really, or should be, an “us all” (Kenny, Sherwin, and Baylis 2010, p. 11). Calls to stay at home or wear masks thus align with how Kenny, Sherwin, and Baylis (2010) describe relational solidarity: “What matters in public health is a shared interest in survival, safety and security - an interest that can be effectively pursued through the pursuit of public goods,” such as scientific evidence and ways of managing infectious diseases (p. 11).

While the relational approach to public health ethics is helpful, thinking about responsibility and solidarity during the pandemic becomes difficult for me because of the loss of public space. What kind of togetherness emerges by staying at home? I cannot join with others in public space, if I am complying with orders to stay at home. In an essay originally published in 1957, Arendt (1968) says that technology has brought the world together in a kind of solidarity, but it is a negative solidarity based on fear of the atomic bomb and the destruction of life. This solidarity, she argues, “does not in the least guarantee a common future” (p. 83). On the one

hand, Bonnie Honig (2020) argues that social isolation can encourage togetherness and is not a turn towards the private. She states, “Social isolation is social, unlike isolationism, which is anti-social. Social isolation is collaborative and neighborly. Anti-social isolation is competitive, seeks to survive above all else, and wants to ‘win.’” On the other hand, what concerns us about thinking about solidarity during the pandemic is less a need to win, and more of a concern with focusing on one’s own security at the expense of others.

An interest in survival, even the survival of us all, privileges physical life over political flourishing. It leaves unexplored what comes after we survive, what form that survival takes, and how we envisage living together. Positive solidarity, according to Arendt (1968), must be connected with political responsibility. As we mentioned previously we don’t think theorizing “staying at home” as a form of solidarity is misguided. What we want to claim, however, is that it is a narrow, limited mode of solidarity.

When I think about compliance and obedience, I worry that we focus on our individual behavior and pay less attention to the world. One of my students told me yesterday he received a warning for reading (alone) on a bench in a public park. I have also heard stories of unhoused people in my community receiving such warnings or even fines. And, from the United States, in New York and Florida, Black people are being attacked by police officers (who are not always wearing personal protective equipment) for allegedly violating social distancing protocols (*Democracy Now!* 2020d; Henderson 2020). This is business as usual, using the pandemic as a justification for continued violence against segments of the population. It seems like the new normal is just like the old in some respects. I wonder: does an over-emphasis on isolation and how we must all stay at home encourage us to ignore the ways in which the public realm is still a dangerous place? But what if it is home that is the unhappy place; early reports suggest domestic

violence is increasing as a result of the pandemic (Taub, 2020). Even if home is a happy space, do we ignore the injustices that occur for essential workers who cannot stay at home?

For Arendt (2003a), responsibility is not only about accounting for one's actions, it is also about being accountable to other members of one's political community and for our shared world. Thus, you can be responsible for actions you did not do. To return to a previous question about personal responsibility in a democracy: it seems as if personal responsibility during COVID-19 requires us to challenge the ways in which inequities emerge or are being exacerbated by the pandemic and governmental responses to it.

In Canada, for example, in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, serious inequities have emerged concerning care in long-term homes. Close to 80% of deaths from the pandemic are seniors in these homes. Many of the homes where the deaths occurred are profit-making centres, rather than government-led spaces. Care and profit do not mix well, leading instead to structural injustices that affect those who are most vulnerable in society. And we must ask: what is our collective responsibility to eradicate these inequities?

A recent report from the military, some of whom were sent into several long-term health care homes in Ontario and Quebec has shocked many Canadians. The deplorable conditions that some elderly residents were in is distressing, reaffirming the idea that when profit is a motivator care is at risk. But this is not just a health problem; this is also a gendered issue. Many of the older residents of these homes are women; similarly, most of the carers are women who work in poorly paid jobs, many of which are part-time. Successive governments have ignored calls to change this system. What is our collective responsibility to deal with this situation?

The crisis in care homes in Ontario is not the fault of a singular government or individual, even though the actions of certain individuals may bear significant responsibility for the situation

(Malek, 2020). To address the disparities that are being uncovered between the quality of care in for-profit and not-for-profit care homes requires a structural lens. To accomplish this task, Iris Marion Young's (2006) social connection model of responsibility is especially helpful for thinking about collective responsibility. Influenced by Arendt, Young argues that we can be responsible to those with whom we are connected, albeit in dispersed ways, through social structures. In seeking to achieve one's goals or plans, Young maintains, a person interacts with diverse organizations and diverse others in a myriad of ways. These interactions take place through the web of social processes and connections. Structural injustices occur when hierarchies are created whereby one group is under a threat of domination or has restricted opportunities for action, and another group receives social benefits or enhanced opportunities for action. Because of the messy interactions and processes involved, structural injustice can occur even when some agents are acting with good intentions and according to accepted norms. And this system will continue to perpetuate injustice unless there is systemic change. More concretely, when we order food delivery (*LA Times* Editorial Board, 2020), purchase meat (Harris, 2020), or utilize online businesses such as Amazon (Levin, 2020) to get household necessities without leaving the house, we are staying at home. But we are also part of a web of relations whereby essential workers who work for these companies are often denied a safe working environment.

Your point is powerfully demonstrated in an article I read recently. It was about a railway worker in London, England; she and her colleague were spat on by some passenger who told them he had COVID-19. Both women became sick; one of them died from the virus. This story is all the more tragic because the woman who died, Belly Mujinga, had repeatedly asked her employer for PPE equipment, which was not forthcoming (Weaver and Dodd, 2020).

What Young describes as “social structural processes,” such as those bureaucratic

processes that prevent precarious workers from having the PPE they need, enable some bodies to flourish while constraining others. Politicians and public health officials should be examining systemic inequalities that affect the health of various groups, especially those which are vulnerable or marginalized socially (Baxter, 2020; Kenny, Sherwin, & Baylis, 2010). Yet, as Judith Butler notes (2012), we do not get to choose the people with whom we share the world. She talks about two senses of vulnerability (or “precarity,” in her terms). The first is an existential claim about the human condition, and the second is produced by social conditions and processes. Butler states: “So as soon as the existential claim is articulated in its specificity, it was never existential. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that address the organization and protection of bodily needs” (p. 148). The virus seems to have brought our existential vulnerability and interdependence to the fore. Thus, it alerts us to a paradox; that is, our physical health is vulnerable to the new virus, while our mental well-being is vulnerable through increased isolation. While it seems that many are grappling with this paradox of vulnerability, our argument is that the virus and this paradox should also alert us to pay attention to our social connections with others, to take responsibility for structural injustices that occur in the workplace, and to recognize how they affect diverse working lives. In particular, what this pandemic has brought to the fore is the gender, race, and other intersectional inequities that can be erased behind our politicians’ calls for a collective and dutiful response on the part of citizens (Ai, 2020).

In this spirit, legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (2020) critiques the language of “We’re all in this together” for ignoring racial inequities in the United States. As she highlights, “majority-Black counties faced three times the COVID-19 infection rate, and nearly six times the mortality rate from the virus, than majority-white counties did.” When crises fail to take account

of historical and existing power dynamics, solutions might ignore or worsen inequities, such as the US Congress' legislative attempts to alleviate economic hardship during the pandemic.²

Crenshaw traces the government's "color blind" pandemic response as stemming from intersectional racism in economic policy in the Great Depression, through the 1960s Civil Rights era, to responses to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005. For both Arendt and Young, if a person or an organization contributes to structural injustice, they have a responsibility to remedy harm. Thus, a positive view of solidarity in pandemic times must move beyond compliance with government or public health directives. Togetherness is not just a feeling of mutuality, but a call to action.

To return to the question you raised at the conference: Does the coronavirus begin something new in the world? While the virus is not a beginner, we might shift the question to consider whether new forms of human togetherness have emerged in its wake. Would we call this togetherness "solidarity" or "responsibility"? Take, for instance, those who come together in a public space to critique government action, but do so in a menacing way, such as when members of the Michigan militia took over the Michigan State Capitol to protest against the COVID-19 restrictions. These restrictions of the right to gather in public space were, they argued, counter to their democratic rights. Although the protest did not lead to harm, the way that the militia used assault rifles to guard the door of the Assembly suggested violence could erupt in the political arena. And violence, as we know from Arendt (1958; 1969), is anathema to politics, since it closes down the dialogue and debate that is the essence of the Arendtian polis. And yet, the militia protest seemed motivated by some kind of shared political concern for freedom, even

² Citing its lack of protections for workers and vulnerable communities, Congress member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was the only member of the Democratic Party to vote against a \$484 billion dollar relief bill on April 23 (*Democracy Now!* 2020c).

if their action looks suspect to many of us.

Arendt's distinction between freedom and liberty may be helpful in thinking through the Michigan militia protest. Freedom, in Arendt's (1958; 1965) thought, refers to our ability to share public space, to speak and act with our peers. In contrast, liberty is being free from the necessities of life that enslave us and prevent us from enacting our freedom. These necessities could be the mundane activities of daily living: eating, sleeping, caring for dependents, or persistent conditions such as poverty. For Arendt, one can be liberated from poverty and still not be free, that is, still not be part of a political community. The militia's protest seems more about liberty than freedom, about protecting individuals' rights to do and go as they please rather than about concern for others. Ultimately, the Michigan protests do not seem to aim at protecting the public realm from disappearing, but rather seek to ensure individual liberty to pursue one's own security.

Although Kenny, Sherwin, and Baylis (2010) emphasize social justice and solidarity in their relational account of public health ethics, we contend there needs to be more interaction between how these conceptual pillars are articulated by feminist scholars. In our view, solidarity in public health must extend beyond "a shared interest in "survival, safety and security" (Kenny, Sherwin, & Baylis, 2010; p. 11) to promote an inclusive and accessible political community. We need to closely integrate social justice concerns with solidarity in public health ethics.

Such an integration is well-illustrated by Baxter's (2020) weaving together personal narrative about caring for her aging father with factual information about long-term care in the UK. According to Baxter, we cannot understand the challenges her father faced in receiving adequate care as he was moved between various institutions during the pandemic unless we also attend to structural factors. These factors include the gendered demographics of unpaid care for

elders within families, federal defunding of local health supports, a sufficient number of staff in care homes, the poor pay and precarious conditions of (predominantly women) care workers, and even corporate tax havens. In sum, despite an emphasis on relationality in public health ethics, when solidarity is framed in terms of shared interests such as survival, safety, and security, then liberty can still be privileged over freedom thereby diminishing the ability of all members of the community to flourish.

If we are correct in reading the Michigan militia protest as people coming together around private interests, it seems as if the protest is not an exemplar of Arendtian solidarity. Rather, as Lisa Disch (1996) notes, Arendt's conception of solidarity is about a common purpose rather than a common interest. And here, "purpose" must be something that is worldly and not private. Perhaps new forms of togetherness are emerging with the caravan protests, where people drive or bicycle through empty city streets, such as what took place in Washington DC (*Democracy Now!*, 2020a). Similar expressions of solidarity with front line workers and calling for better worker protections, racial justice, and environmental justice, happened across Europe. In San Juan, Puerto Rico, people demanded more testing and supplies from the government (*Democracy Now!* 2020b). On the face of it, these actions seem to be about the private sphere or economics. Yet these global actions also affirm the world as a space humans share, as our political home.

The Possibility of Public Happiness in our "New Normal"

The COVID-19 crisis brings into focus an enduring challenge for political world-building. As the virus interrupts the familiarity of daily life, it has also revealed that our political home can be enhanced or destroyed by the actions of politicians and by inequities produced through structural matters, such as healthcare funding. Indeed, it seems as if many societies are at

a serious juncture where we have the potential for making new choices about how we want to live together. The COVID-19 crisis has also shown us that we too have a choice in that we can live our lives in fear and isolation, or we can start to trust one another again as we move back to our public spaces. Establishing trust will be important in helping people learn to adapt to the new normal in organizational spaces and other public places. Public trust in our previous version of normal was waning, because of injustices in the workplace and elsewhere. Across the globe, the world was facing serious issues, borne out of neoliberal injustice as well as climate denial. Could it be that this virus has made us think again about what matters? And, if so, what will that mattering look like? It has been an anxious time for sure, but it has also been a moment where many people have had the opportunity to reflect on what matters to them.

An Arendtian politics is concerned with how we share the world in such a way that it becomes a place of belonging, not just for a few, but for humanity. In this paper, we have examined ways in which “Virus interruptus” offers an opportunity to rethink how we build a political home. As McMurray and Pullen argue (2019), Arendt shows us how “rationality, probability, regulation, institutionalisation and quantification serve to limit space for individuality and difference as we are imprisoned by industrialisation, capitalism and marketisation” (p. 2). As we have illustrated, the temptation to view our pandemic crisis in statistical terms risks obscuring some important structural injustices.

Addressing structural injustices will require organizational change. Bloom (2018) asks how can we create the conditions for organizational politics to flourish. That is, how can we envisage new ways of organizing that offer space for diverse ways of being in the world? An Arendtian way of thinking about organizational action, he states, is not concerned with “a logic of means and ends but rather revel in the joy of simply acting to create the potential for

something new to exist” (p. 78). As you mentioned earlier, questions about world-building presume a community already exists, when for many it does not, at least not in the robust way Arendt views world-building as central to politics. The problem for political world-building is that structural injustices work to exclude some people, such as our elders or front line workers, from mattering. On her account, political community emerges through our acting and speaking together (Arendt, 1958). Along these lines, solidarity establishes a community (Arendt, 1965). Our everyday social interactions may be fleeting and may disappear as soon as the business of “normal” life resumes. Yet, it seems as if some people have found time for reflection during the pandemic; such reflection may have awoken a realization that, for humanity to flourish, everyone needs rights to have a home, have meaningful and safe work, and to have enough food to sustain them. The argument we have begun here could be extended in future work to consider solidarity in pandemic times alongside Arendt’s (1951) conception of “the right to have rights.” Arendt uses this term to expose a contradiction in the way human rights are applied to stateless people; what has emerged during the pandemic is the need to reconsider how individual rights (and which individuals' rights) are undermined or ignored as a result of structural injustice in the workplace, and elsewhere.

In addition, perhaps some of us have learned through this pandemic that small, everyday interactions, such as conversations between neighbors and colleagues, have the ongoing potential to not only offer us a recognition of our shared space but also highlight the importance of making human connections. There is this potential, at the least, for diverse forms of community to emerge from these moments. Perhaps, in a small way, the joy of acting together that Bloom (2019) describes, and the potential for community-building that we have explored, is akin to the kind of public happiness that Arendt (1965) talks about as emerging in times of revolutionary

change. This public happiness captures the existential component of striving to build a political community together, being able to have an impact in one's community, and being motivated to act to protect the community as a space where people can gather. Yet, such public happiness is fleeting. Part of the task of revolution, according to Arendt, is to build a more stable home for it. What a political home looks like for pandemic times is as yet uncertain and up to us, together, to build. We have not prescribed any particular response to COVID-19, but rather sought to highlight the urgency of attending to structural injustices that affect health and also limit the ways in which people can exercise their freedom.

There is no doubt we are living in new times, but how these new times will turn out depends upon all of us having trust in one another. Our politicians can only do so much; it is up to us, collectively, to begin the process of rebuilding our public spaces, as best we can. As Bonnie Honnig (2020) explains, “[t]he virus can make us go private, or it can lead us to a renewed democratic appreciation of public things, like public health services coordinated by dedicated experts.” The task is to think through political world-building in an ecological, ethical, and relational manner. To address structural injustices, we need more world-building conversations about how to envisage our society in the future. A return to the old normal is not the way forward; yet what our new normal looks like depends on the conversations we have together about the ethical dimensions of a new ecological and equitable politics that embraces all of us. Finally, as McMurray and Pullen (2019) note, Arendt's work has been rarely taken up in organizational studies, although this lacunae is beginning to change (Bloom, 2019; Gardiner, 2019; Gardiner, 2018; Gardiner & Fulfer, 2017). As feminist scholars whose work engages with Arendt across a range of organizational topics, we encourage other researchers to consider how thinking with Arendt can help us to reflect upon our interdependence not only with each other,

but with the world.

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