

Corporate COVID Cultures

Matthew Archer

In early 2020, China closed many of its factories in response to the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2, signaling an early commitment to what is now called its “zero COVID strategy.” A friend who works for a shipping company didn’t understand or support this decision, arguing that it was irresponsible for the Chinese government to implement such a strict shutdown when so much of the global economy depends on Chinese manufactured things. China is often stereotyped as a mass producer of cheap clothes and home goods, but many of the world’s most advanced technological components, things like batteries and computer chips, are also made there, as well as facemasks and other protective equipment. The world, we were told, needed these factories to stay open.

Back in Copenhagen, where I was working at the time, the Chinese lockdown seemed worlds away. The Danish government was reporting a few dozen new cases of COVID per day, attributing most of them to people returning from Austrian and Italian ski trips, but had done little other than recommending hand washing. By mid-March, however, Denmark had implemented one of the earliest and strictest shutdowns in Europe. Everyone except “essential workers” (health professionals and grocery store workers) started to work from home. For those who couldn’t work from home – performance artists, waiters, etc. – the government provided assistance, which depended on those workers not pursuing other

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employment.

Danes are notoriously compliant when it comes to regulation, at least in their own national imaginary. They claim that they are happy to pay their taxes because they know it goes to support the radically equal social democracy they have built over the past seventy or eighty years, a society where the rich and the poor have the same access to high quality healthcare, where parents enjoy substantial paid parental leave, and where students receive a generous stipend to attend university. As an immigrant, the cracks in this façade are easier to see – and certainly for immigrants who aren't white academics, the edifice often falls away completely – but it was ultimately an appeal to this imagined community that succeeded in getting most Danish people to accept the regulations without too much complaint. The prime minister, already wont to using refugees as scapegoats in her policymaking, slammed the borders shut as she called on Danes to embrace their Danishness: a concomitant trust in both scientific and political authority, and a commitment to a society of other Danes. Queen Margarethe II echoed this message. Coronavirus, she insisted in a rare televised message, was a “dangerous guest,” just a few moments after she noted the unfortunate but necessary border closures, establishing an insidious equivalence that has resonated over the past two years. As recently as November 2021, my hairdresser casually observed that “immigrants” were by and large refusing to be vaccinated. I assured her that I, an immigrant, had been vaccinated months earlier, and was planning to get the booster as soon as I was eligible. She wasn't talking about immigrants like me, of course, but I wanted her to have to say it out loud.

COVID brought these dynamics into rather sharp focus. It revealed an underbelly of Danish society that only those targeted as others and outsiders – dangerous guests from the other side of the fence – are typically able to see. My friend's incredulity in the face of the Chinese lockdown was ultimately an incredulity that any national government, especially a superpower like China, would threaten the smooth functioning of the global economy in favor of a strict zero covid strategy. From abroad, I watched in horror as the United States did precisely the opposite: offering inadequate support to people affected by the pandemic and confusing regulatory guidance. Workers died of COVID on slaughterhouse floors and on their delivery bikes and in their elementary school classrooms. They gasped for air through recycled masks and upper respiratory tract infections as they took people's orders at drive-thru windows. Overwhelmed nurses and doctors were driven to suicide as their hospitals became triage units. Parents and grandparents, stuck at home with no visits from children and grandchildren, developed new anxieties and depressions.

My sister, a speech pathologist in a hard-hit Mississippi nursing home, directed her frustrations elsewhere: global supply chains. She

bought a house in early 2021 that needed extensive renovations, an effort that was hampered by backed-up parts and shut-down factories. One of the more acute annoyances was that appliances in a particular finish were on back-order from nearly every supplier. During a trip to visit my family in May 2021, my mother and I visited an appliance shop in Tupelo to ask when they expected their brushed stainless-steel ovens to be restocked. "It'll probably be around six months," replied an embattled salesman, blaming it on "the Chinese."

Some of the world's most acclaimed cultural theorists bemoaned the pandemic and the new iniquities it generated as evidence of an unrelenting capitalist juggernaut in books that were outdated the moment they were published. For me, Žižek¹ and Agamben² were less insightful than my sister and my friends trying (and typically failing) to make sense of the conditions and consequences of COVID. It was through these emic, context-specific evaluations and re-evaluations of the pandemic that its stakes really became clear. As we enter the third year of higher and higher "waves" and their ostensibly record-breaking "peaks," our mundane experiences living with and through a plague shed more light on the politics of disease than detached, overtly clever criticism.

I often think about my own consumption choices through the course of the pandemic. My husband and I ordered lots of takeout via the online platform Wolt. When we had COVID in February 2021, we ordered groceries via the website Nemlig (Danish for "exactly"). In Denmark, these companies were in the news for labor abuses like union intimidation and unpaid salaries. With stores closed (or opened with various restrictions), consumers went online to shop, putting even more pressure on warehouse workers and delivery drivers whose work is governed by unforgiving algorithms. Amazon's market value soared, as did the wealth of its founder, right up to the edge of earth's atmosphere. It wasn't just Bezos who got richer during the pandemic: Around the world, the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer.

Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism, the idea that capitalism is so thoroughly dominant that it is difficult to even imagine an alternative, seems to have given way to a pandemic realism, "the way capital [and the] state have convinced people there's no alternative to the eugenics of mass infection."³ But as disorienting as it was to watch billionaires brazenly enrich themselves on the backs of workers dying in their factories, it was also clarifying, especially to the extent that we gained new insights into the motivations and justifications of corporate

¹ Žižek, Slavoj. *Pandemic!: COVID-19 shakes the world*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.

² Agamben, Giorgio. *Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.

³ <https://twitter.com/JoyAndDefiance/status/1475568867242037254>

actors.

If it wasn't clear before, we've seen during the pandemic that the shareholder model of value drives managers to sacrifice whatever they can for the pursuit of profit. There was broad awareness of this. A popular meme format in late 2021, for instance, mocked the US Center for Disease Control's (CDC) bizarre new guidelines, calling attention to the intimate relationship between business and government, and vindicating theorists of the neoliberal state. Zak Toscani (@zak_toscani) tweeted that the "CDC recommends splitting up your quarantine over your two [fifteen-minute] breaks,"⁴ while sai (@Saisailu97) tweeted, "The CDC recommends shotgunning [energy drinks] when you wake up every morning to be as productive as possible for your employer."⁵ Anish K. Mitra (@anishkmitra) tweeted a photo of Jeff Bezos, relaxing on a pool floatie embraced by his new girlfriend with the caption "BREAKING: CDC confirms the best defense against all variants is 200 billion dollars."⁶

Companies and investors called for "balance" and "discretion." During follow-up interviews with investors at a European bank where I had conducted fieldwork on sustainable finance in 2018 and 2019, informants insisted that governments shouldn't "overdo it" regarding lockdowns. The costs of letting COVID spread had to be weighed against the benefits of leaving the economy running. Like friends working in consulting firms or logistics companies, these investors had a hard time imagining alternatives to growth; for them, a failure to protect "the market" was as catastrophic as a failure to protect people, especially workers, from the pandemic. People quickly became fluent in epidemiology and biostatistics, comparing mortality rates and reproduction ratios to soaring property values and a "hot" stock market. We watched in real time as more and more workers became "essential." Those who just a few years earlier had been theorized as performing "bullshit jobs" were suddenly pulled back to their cubicles in service of the economy. "Essential," as it were, became an insidious synonym for "expendable."

There are few silver linings to a pandemic that, at the end of 2021, had claimed more than five million lives worldwide, but perhaps one positive outcome is that more people seem to be aware that their employers are happy to sacrifice them on the altar of profit and are learning to think outside the box imposed by shareholder capitalism. If widely publicized unionization efforts like those at John Deere and General Mills are any indication, the pandemic has, at the very least, helped workers recognize that their labor creates value and wealth, and that gives them power.

⁴ https://twitter.com/zak_toscani/status/1475614666567008256

⁵ <https://twitter.com/Saisailu97/status/1475878828438429697>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/anishkmitra/status/1475610197104156675>

At the same time, however, the pandemic has created a new smokescreen. Like greenwashing, where companies pursue profits behind a veil of social or environmental sustainability, the phenomenon we might call “pandemicwashing” has allowed companies to hide their efforts to cut costs and boost productivity behind a commitment to the health and safety of workers. This is especially pronounced in the mining industry. As part of my ongoing research on “sustainable mining,”⁷ I have attended several online webinars and workshops on new mining technologies, with a specific focus on digital connectivity in underground mines to facilitate remote operations and the development of machine learning technologies to facilitate “automated” decision-making. These webinars typically feature middle managers from both mining and technology companies, and they nearly always include a discussion of the pandemic. In countries like Chile and Sweden where labor is relatively expensive, or in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Angola where labor abuses in mining sites attract significant media attention, managers used the threat of COVID spreading among mine workers as an excuse to call for greater automation.

In a November 2021 webinar on digital technologies in the mining industry, one participant argued that mining companies had not been spared from the effects of the pandemic, and that safety concerns had triggered a “surge in digital transformation.” The industry, he claimed, is concerned with its social license to operate, reducing operating and capital expenses (“opex” and “capex”), worker skills and safety, and improved agility and operational efficiency. Digital technologies help companies meet these goals by facilitating real-time energy monitoring, predictive maintenance, and remote operations. Underlying this rosy narrative, however, is a starker truth. As the head of mining operations at a technology company told me in an interview, remote operations in particular help companies avoid costly shutdowns during, among other things, pandemics. The pandemic, much like concerns about the social and environmental impacts of mining, offers a thin veneer for companies to develop and implement profit enhancing technologies and management strategies. In the context of COVID, laying off mineworkers is justified as protecting those workers from the threat of infection.

Business anthropologists are well-placed to document and analyze these dynamics. The pandemic shows no signs of ending, and it seems like the best thing we can hope for now is that it evolves into a mild new strain of the common cold. In the meantime, we should observe the way companies mobilize the pandemic to improve their bottom lines. Has the corporate culture of shareholder primacy been challenged during the pandemic, or has it been reinforced and allowed to expand into new

⁷ For some preliminary results, see: Filipe Calvão and Matthew Archer, “Digital Extraction: Blockchain Traceability in Mineral Supply Chains,” *Political Geography* 87 (2021): 102381.

domains? Surely one of the goals of business anthropology over the next few years should be to develop a rigorous, ethnographic approach to understanding – and dismantling – these screens of corporate culture.

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