

7. A Case Study of Covid-19: Towards a Montage of the Pandemic Assemblage

Pin 1: Posthuman Object / Emergence

We need to (re-)assemble Covid-19. That is to say, we have to adopt a posthumanist perspective and shift the unit of analysis (Pickering 2005). In order to do more justice to Covid's complexity, we must think multiply (Clarke 2019: 134). Be a Kraken.¹ Follow the swirls of the cyclone. That means reshuffling existing constellations of agential cuts. Suspending the Great Divides: nature/society, subject/object, human/nonhuman, matter/discourse, social/natural sciences, and so on. Relationality and entanglement instead of boundedness and self-enclosed units, processuality and becoming rather than fixity and stability (cf. **ch. 1**). We need to reconstitute Covid-19 as a *posthuman object* of inquiry (Pickering 2005) – as an assemblage. To begin this work, lists, of the type of the well-known “Latour litanies” (Bogost 2012: 38), remain helpful (cf. also Fox/Alldred 2017):

... – humans – Corona viruses – pangolins – bats – domestic animals – deforestation – agribusiness – monocultures – bushmeat – wildlife trafficking – factory farms – research laboratories – wet markets – urban centers – nation states – global transportation networks – biosecurity – healthcare systems – international trade – biotechnology – tourism – media – surveillance – laws – discourses – representations – narratives – platform companies – rapid testing – biodiversity loss – policies – lockdowns – science – pharmaceutical companies – parliaments – home – transnational organizations – freedom – climate change – mobile applications – diplomacy – normality – experts – affects and emotions – socio-cultural practices – bio-/necropolitics – crisis – identities – masks – stock markets – microscopes – unemployment – disinfectants – toilet paper – conspiracies – race – gender – class – age – care – Zoom – vulnerability – ...

Such lists are not only inevitably incomplete, they are also irritatingly unsystematic, lacking any obvious order, structure, coherence, or a consistent level of scale or

1 On my proposal of ‘Kraken theory’, cf. Cord 2026.

abstraction. In fact, they are best described as a- or non-systematic. As such, they can perhaps be related to Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' (1986, 1994: xviii) and his famous discussion of Borges' strange 'Chinese encyclopedia' – these lists defy our expectations, scramble received taxonomies, and challenge established modes of knowing. In this way, they urge us to see and think differently – they open up ways to a radical *penser autrement*, to "another system of thought" (Foucault 1994: xv). In this way, they help us begin the conjuncture-analytical work of answering the question 'What does this have to do with everything else?' (Hall), refracting it through the assemblage-analytical maxim 'Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something' (Haraway) (cf. **ch. 6**). This work has no definite beginning or end. Much depends on the analytical and political interests and outlooks of the respective researcher; these determine which arbitrary closures and agential cuts they perform. And the elements and relations they focus on will each need to be unraveled into further assemblages. In its complexity, interdisciplinarity, and openness, this is moreover a decidedly collective work. A conjunctural analysis of Covid-19 will thus emerge as a mosaic or montage – an assemblage – of a multiplicity of maps and stories.

I have argued that heterogeneity, emergence, and contingency are key features of assemblages (cf. **ch. 2**). For posthumanist Cultural Studies, what is central in the analysis of all of these is the question of *power* (cf. **postscript**, **ch. 5**, **ch. 6**). And this is, essentially, a question of *articulation*. How, why, under what circumstances did a particular constellation take shape? In what way, through what means, by which actants, for which purposes, in whose interests, and at what costs are its specific relations being maintained? Consider the vexed question of the 'beginning' of the pandemic. Here, Cultural Studies would not only follow Foucault (1984) and shift the focus away from a search for 'origins' towards an investigation of 'emergence' (Kirksey 2020: 12) – in doing so, it would also emphasize Covid's strongly *overdetermined* nature. It is doubtful that we will ever be able to say with certainty whether the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak began 'in the field' (the Wuhan wet market, farther out in the Wuhan wild foods circuit, or elsewhere) or in a laboratory. Important as such questions are, it is critical to emphasize a) that none of these options mean that the emergence of the pandemic can be safely ascribed to either the pole of 'nature' or the pole of 'society', and b) that each of these 'origins' would need to be positioned within a wider web of complex relations and itself to be re/constructed as just such a web. Assemblages always lead to further assemblages. Thus, even if, as a group of prominent viral phylogeneticists claimed in 2020, the virus was most likely "not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus" but the result of "natural selection" (Andersen et al. 2020), this process must immediately be contextualized and re/assembled and thereby exposed as (also) profoundly *unnatural*, or better: as *natural-cultural*.

Already viruses themselves, including Coronaviruses, are constantly mutating and thus constitute “*quasi-species*” (Lowe 2010: 625) rather than well-bounded populations. They are “mutant swarms”, ceaselessly becoming in and through what Celia Lowe has called “multispecies clouds”, that is, “collections of species transforming together in both ordinary and surprising ways” (2010: 625, 626; cf. Kirksey 2020: 12). Notably, these multispecies assemblages frequently include not only a multiplicity of animal hosts (including humans) and ecological communities, but also all sorts of ‘human’ components such as political, economic, and social forces (institutions, infrastructures, practices, etc.) which also shape the becoming. Accordingly, epizootics and zoonoses should often likewise be thought along such lines, that is, for instance, as closely entangled with biodiversity loss induced by deforestation and the growth of monocultures, with ecosystem degradation contributing in multiple ways to the opening up of new disease vectors. And these practices of land grabbing and deforestation in turn need to be thought as part of what is known as ‘ecologically unequal exchange’, whereby the countries and companies of the so-called ‘Global North’ drain the resources and deplete the ecosystems of the so-called ‘Global South’ – in other words, the extractivist and commodifying circuits of global capital. And hence, ultimately, as bound up with the lifestyles and consumption habits of the citizens in those Northern societies where the goods for the sake of which these practices are carried out in the South are consumed (cf. Malm 2020; Wallace 2020). The emergence of the pandemic ‘in the field’ thus cannot be thought outside of the parameters of the capitalist ‘externalization societies’ of the Global North (Lessenich 2019).

But a similar, tentacular analytic, moving in multiple directions and proceeding in widening spirals, would have to be employed in the case of the laboratory hypothesis as well. Thus, a close analysis of ‘laboratory life’ and ‘science in action’ in the vein of actor-network theory (Latour 1987; Latour/Woolgar 1986) (difficult here, of course, due to the lack of access to the laboratories) would need to be interlinked with, for instance, the tracing of the multiple relations that tie the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its experiments with Coronaviruses to other, including ‘Western’, research facilities, organizations, and state agencies, among them the American EcoHealth Alliance and the US National Institutes of Health (cf. Wallace 2020: 89–94). But it would also mean more generally to situate such institutions and their research in a complex network of relations, drivers, and dependencies that comprises not only “legitimate concerns about emergent infectious diseases”, but also “the return of ‘respectable’ biowarfare research, the ideological demands of the War on Terror, and the next iteration in Keynesian military economy” (Wallace 2020: 95). As Rob Wallace points out, such labs “represent a political logistics folding in calculated dangers that science propaganda spins away as so much conspiracy theory” – they effectively “produc[e] the very threat of outbreak the labs were ostensibly set up to stop” (2020: 95).

These complicated assemblages obviously need to be studied in detail. Yet, what is already clear is that we must not “fetishiz[e] causality in the objects involved” (Wallace 2020: 96). Causation is not local and linear, but dispersed, multi-directional, multi-temporal. We recall Jane Bennett’s new materialist account of congregational agency here and her understanding of causality as emergent, fractal, and circuitous (2010: 32–34). And yet, we also recall the problems we identified with this approach (cf. **ch. 5**). While agency and responsibility are distributed, there are, I have argued, nevertheless nodes of articulation, quilting points, and overcoding assemblages, which have a defining impact on the shape of networks of relations. They *determine*, in the sense in which I have used that term (cf. **ch. 6**). In fact, if we somewhat read Bennett against the grain (and against herself), some of her own formulations actually seem to point in a similar direction, for instance when, referring to Hannah Arendt, she defines a ‘cause’ (here, following Arendt’s distinction, understood in the sense of an ‘origin’) as “a complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of forces” (2010: 33). An overcoding assemblage can be thought as just such an ‘enjoiner’ of actants, a force that draws the latter together, articulates them in a particular way, and works to maintain the resulting constellation. Following Wallace, Andreas Malm, and others, I would argue that in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, capitalism constituted precisely such a meta-driver. It did play a determining role in what happened – not because it was the sole cause of everything, but because it significantly structured ‘possibility spaces’ and drove the ‘entrenchment’ (Williams 2020) of articulations and relationalities that led to the emergence of the pandemic and substantially shaped its course – from the emergence of the virus up to the question of ‘who gets to die?’ (Clarke 2021: 250), that is, to its different effects along the webs of bio-/necropolitics and their matrices of differential exposure and vulnerability (cf., e.g., Lorenzini 2021; Malm 2020: 91–100). Consequently, while a better understanding of the exact beginnings of the pandemic is clearly important, it is also critical to recognize that, regarding the issue of ‘field vs. lab’, “what appear diametrically opposed premises [...] in actuality are scattered together around the dictates of capital and the imperial states that serve it” (Wallace 2020: 97). By making this argument, I am not exculpating other actants, such as the Chinese government – rather, like Malm, I suggest we learn “to see [the rest of the capitalist world] in China and China in that world” and acknowledge that “*China could become the cradle of this disease only because global tendencies were present in concentrated form*” (2020: 67, 61f). Across the rhizomatic multiplicity of elements and relations that make up the pandemic assemblage, capital remains the “meta-virus and patron of parasites” (Malm 2020: 78).

Pin 2: Disease Emergence

The approach to the issue of emergence outlined in pin 1 effectively constitutes a development of the important notion of ‘*disease emergence*’, which has been in wide use at least since the late 1980s (in response to the AIDS epidemic). This concept already encourages a relational understanding of disease by viewing it as “a product of the entangled interplay of environments, hosts, pathogens and humans” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 537f) and thus calling for consideration of a number of different factors such as, to use the standard language usually employed in this context, animal domestication, human population expansion, changes in human behavior, international travel, commerce, and conflict, technology and industry, virus structure, transmission, and mutation, and animal migration, feeding behavior, and dispersal (Johnson 2014). The revision of this concept within the context of a posthumanist conjunctural analysis is twofold: For one thing, it involves a radicalization of the understanding of relationality along the lines of concepts such as ‘intra-action’ or ‘becoming-with’, which also introduce a stronger dimension of processuality. Following the original work of Steve Hinchliffe and his colleagues (2013, 2017), such a move challenges the spatial and ontological assumptions underlying received views of disease outbreaks, where pathogens basically cross over from a diseased elsewhere/outside into the separate space of a healthy and normal here/inside, by replacing a topographical with a topological sensibility. The latter “prompts us to do two things: first, to think about proximity, presence and distance in ways that disrupt our sense of what is near and what is far, and, second, to disrupt the notion that pathogens or disease refer to discrete, unchanging objects that retain the same form regardless of their diffusion over space” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 538). In the place of ‘borderlines’, what emerges are ‘borderlands’, “marked by the complex intersection”, or better, intra-action, “of multiple spatio-temporal [dis]orders” (Saskia Sassen qtd. in Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 538, alteration in original) working to different rhythms and logics, “spaces in the making, [...] where borders are continually being restated through the juxtaposition of different elements, some close up, others folded in from afar, detached and re-embedded in ways that give rise to new and novel arrangements” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 538). This, precisely, is a landscape of contingent assemblages, not fixed spaces, identities, and objects, “an entangled landscape marked by folds and intensities”, where “borders are detached from geographic territory”, akin, to use an image, to a crumpled handkerchief stuffed into one’s pocket (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 532, 538).

The second central aspect of our revision of the notion of disease emergence is to insist that the precise shape of these landscapes, however, is not accidental. While overdetermined, it is nevertheless the result of *articulations*, and thus also of relations of *power* (cf. **postscript, ch. 5, ch. 6**). As Rob Wallace puts it, this is essentially a question of not “losing the (sociopolitical) forest for the (local) trees”, that is, of not

allowing “a focus on the forensic particularities of any one outbreak [...] [to] obfuscate[e] the relations of production that amplify disease spillover” (2020: 90). What emerges from the groundbreaking work of scholars like Wallace (2016, 2020), Mike Davis (2022), or Andreas Malm (2020) is something like a theory of “*neoliberal disease emergence*”, whose “underlying operative premise is that the cause of COVID-19 and other such pathogens is not found only in the object of any one infectious agent or its clinical course, but also in the field of ecosystemic relations that capital and other structural causes have pinned back to their own advantage” (Wallace 2020: 55, emphasis added). It is a question of tracing what Wallace terms the ‘circuits of capital’. Here, epidemiologies are inextricably bound up with the ‘relational geographies’ that tie the “‘neoliberal frontiers’” (Wallace 2020: 83) characterized by logging, mining, intensive plantation agriculture, wildlife hunting, and other extractivist practices to the hubs of global capitalism where the profits are reaped. Consequently, it is capital centers such as New York, London, or Hong Kong that, in this perspective, now emerge as “the world’s worst disease hotspots” (Wallace 2020: 49). As Malm explains: “The forces reaching out to forests and pulling out pathogens are nowhere as strong as in the central nodes of capital.” (2020: 55) Thus, when we tackle the issue of disease emergence, why not begin there? This will make for a very different kind of ‘outbreak narrative’ (cf. Wald 2008). It will make for ‘better stories’ – this, as Lawrence Grossberg has repeatedly emphasized, is what Cultural Studies is all about. Above all, these stories will make clear that today, “[t]here are no capital-free pathogens” (Wallace 2020: 33).

Pin 3: Pinboard

The issue of the ‘(re-)constitution’ of the object of analysis raised in pin 1 also entails methodological considerations, including questions of form. After all, such constitution is always a material-discursive, onto-epistemological affair. That is to say: Our ways of ‘doing science’ are nothing separate and secondary – methods that we choose ‘after the fact’, to study a phenomenon which is already ‘there’ – but are deeply entangled with, and co-constitutive of, this phenomenon itself. So how to carry out a ‘cultural study’ of posthuman objects then? How to do Cultural Studies in the Anthropo- or Capitalocene?

The title of the third part of this book is meant to invoke Paul du Gay et al.’s classic textbook *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, which, first published in 1997, lucidly laid out what it meant to conduct a cultural study at a different moment in time and in another theoretical conjuncture. If we put the title of part III and the one of this chapter together, we get something analogous to the title of the 1997 volume: “Doing Cultural Studies in the Capitalocene: A Montage of the Pandemic Assemblage”. The correspondences in my title are just as important as the differences.

On the one hand, it signals continuity; for not only do I generally position my project in the intellectual tradition associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, to which the 1997 book and its authors belong as well, I am also convinced of the enduring relevance of many of the book's arguments and concepts. As I hope will have been clear all the way through the preceding chapters, in no way should the overall argument I am making be confused with a call for a wholesale realignment of Cultural Studies. In this regard, the trope of the 'turn' always runs the risk of being somewhat misleading. Decisively, the nonhuman turn (here read as encompassing or at least closely affiliated with the material, affective, ontological, speculative, realist, and related turns) does *not* mean an absolute break with the cultural turn, the defining theoretical 'moment' of the book by du Gay et al. What I think it does mean, however, is the need for the work of *articulation*, and thus for an opening up, expansion, and, in part, for a revision of our received theoretical and analytical repertoire. This is what the changes to the original title of the 1997 volume indicate. As I have been arguing throughout, doing Cultural Studies in the Anthropocene also entails asking some new questions, adding new analytical foci, using novel concepts and approaches, and reworking some of the familiar ones. Among other things, as I explained in pin 1, this involves a rethinking of the object of analysis – away from the notion of a stable and clearly bounded phenomenon towards an understanding of it in terms of a dynamic and heterogeneous assemblage.

I believe that a 'story' (as in "the story of the Sony Walkman") is no longer the ideal form for such an approach to a phenomenon like the pandemic. We need to avoid what I consider to be the story's pitfalls, especially its 'neatness', coherence, unidirectional, linear chronology, the emphasis on discursivity, and its tendency to 'center' the narrator or speaking (human) subject. Here, of course, the 'deterritorializing' (Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari), and 'disseminating' (Jacques Derrida) tendencies of poststructuralism and especially deconstruction present us with helpful tools. Yet, full fragmentation postmodern-style will not do for us either. In keeping with the previous chapter's argument regarding the concept of the totality, we need to devise an approach that is able to do justice to both, unity *and* difference, stability *and* movement, wholeness *and* plurality (cf. **ch. 6**). In other words, what we require is a form that is adequate to and expressive of some 'will to totality', to the desire to 'see it whole', while at the same time, in line with our novel understanding and the notion of the 'decentered totality', sidestepping the dangers of totalization and holism, reductionism, teleology, and simple determinism. A mode of presentation/investigation that reconciles, or carves out a 'third space' characteristic of Cultural Studies beyond the opposition of the 'grand narratives' of the modern and the 'minor' ones or 'language games' of the postmodern (cf. Lyotard 1984). We need narratives that neither negate all heterogeneity and complexity in their eagle-eyed ambition to see 'everything everywhere all at once' (as the title of the 2022 film has it), nor get lost in their ant-like tracing of ever-more minuscule relations (cf. Latour 2007). Stories,

that is to say, that are neither (too) big nor (too) small, but, as James Clifford puts it, 'big enough' – "able to account for a lot, but not everything – and without guarantees of political virtue" (2013: 201). In such stories, "forces intersect but do not form a whole" (Clifford 2013: 201); they "gather up the complexities and keep the edges open" (Haraway 2016: 101).²

While the field of Cultural Studies has generally favored the story-mode, there has long been a resistance to the totalizing pull of the story form and a commitment to its pluralization, to contextuality, contingency, complexity, and the concrete. The textbook by du Gay et al. or the classic *Policing the Crisis* are certainly two cases in point. As we have seen, Cultural Studies has always rejected the notion of a "fixed, seamless totality where everything is neatly slotted into place" (Grossberg 2019: 47) and has hence "sought analytical methods that can balance this level of intellectual ambition [i.e., the will-to-totality] with a healthy scepticism regarding the possibility of ever constructing a fully exhaustive account of any given social 'totality'" (Gilbert 2019: 12). To some extent, it has always tried to acknowledge the "general impossibility" (Highmore 2020: 37) of the project of mapping the social totality. However, as Ben Highmore has observed in a recent, very instructive intervention, the 'impossibility' of this project is today further underlined and augmented by the analytic demands placed before us by the problematic of the Anthropocene, such as the necessity to think in terms of multiple, incommensurable, 'disjunctive' time-scales (Highmore's main focus), for instance human time(s) as well as planetary time(s) (cf. Chakrabarty 2021), or the obligation to take into account the roles played by a multiplicity of formerly neglected nonhuman actants (cf. **ch. 5**). These further complexifications of our analysis constitute added challenges to the form of the story. It seems increasingly doubtful that it is still able, even in its complexity-sensitive, 'minorized' Cultural Studies-shape, to do justice to the new messiness. In a similar vein, Highmore (2020), drawing on Walter Benjamin, has proposed a (re-)turn to a 'constellatory thinking' for Cultural Studies and, with this, to the form of the *montage*. Such an approach is still focused on drawing out connections, but it also more strongly acknowledges (e.g., temporal) heterogeneity, multiplicity, and irreconcilability. It is, to use Highmore's terminology, attentive to both, the conjunctural and the disjunctural. It remains attuned to the "messy, untamed coincidence" of our materials, to "fragile and ephemeral assemblages", and the narratives it creates "don't reconcile themselves into a coherent picture" (Highmore 2020: 38).

2 I believe that this aspect, that is, the question of what *types of stories* are needed, offers a potential starting point for what I am convinced could be a very productive closer dialogue with the field of literary studies, especially narratology. Of particular relevance here may be the work of scholars broadly associated with the 'narrative turn', such as Peter Brooks. In this context, cf. Brooks' (2022) recent study on the 'epistemology of narrative' and the 'use and abuse' of stories in a world that is now 'overtaken by narrative'.

The montage, originally a visual rather than a narrative technique, favored by Dadaist and Surrealist artists, thus emerges as a form that may well consist of stories – though always in the plural – but that assembles these in a rather juxtapositionary, non-totalizing manner, and is therefore better able to capture/perform complexity. Incidentally, such an approach to the question of form finds support in the work of actor-network theorists such as John Law or Annemarie Mol. Though their main concern is a different one, proceeding as they do from the key assumption of the ‘de-centering of the object’ and investigating the multiple ways in which a given object is differently ‘enacted’ in diverse contexts (Law 2002; Mol 2002), importantly, this concern leads them to a very similar desire to break with both, modernism and post-modernism, that is, to evade the “choice between the homogeneities of centered storytelling on the one hand, and pluralism of fragmentation on the other” (Law 2002: 2). When, for instance, Law speaks about the false dualism of things cohering together as a consistent whole or not cohering at all and of instead wanting to balance plurality and singularity through concepts such as ‘fractional coherence’ – which is about “drawing things together without centering them” (2) – or the slogan ‘more than one, but less than many’ (2–4), then I think there are notable resonances with some of the central concerns of Cultural Studies I have discussed, particularly in the previous chapter, and with key notions such as ‘articulation’, ‘arbitrary closure’, ‘no necessary correspondence’, ‘unity-in-difference’, or ‘anti-anti-essentialism’. Law in particular directly links these matters with the question of *how we should write*, of, to use his terminology, how to perform fractional ways of knowing, how to write fractionally, and thus how to “write about multiplicity in a way that also produces the effects of singularity” or “about singularity in a way that does not efface the performances of multiplicity” (4). To this end, in place of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would call the ‘arborescent’, tree-like structure of the story, Law (2002, esp. ch. 9) proposes the metaphor of the *pinboard* to advocate for experiments with alternative modes of writing which take the form of ‘rhizomatic’ networks without the necessity of a single, unifying order. The pinboard is a montage of multiple stories (or also non-narrative, e.g. pictorial, elements), a pastiche of “[s]maller narratives” (5) or “snapshots” (Mol 2002: 53) placed alongside one another, a form of telling about and knowing things “in little patches” (Law 2002: 191). Neither a modern nor a post-modern logic, but a *nonmodern* one. It moves from one story to another, without any central coordination, and yet, though the texts are uncentered and not singular, they nevertheless have intersections, hold together, and cohere (5). But this is not the absolute, smooth, self-assured coherence of the story form, but one that emerges from narrations that are only “partially connected” (193; cf. Strathern 2004), from a montage that is only partially, and tentatively, centered. As Law points out, the pinboard mode is about “ways of knowing that are simultaneously modest and complex” (203) – certainly an ambition that resonates with the aspirations of Cultural Studies. It is an assemblage for a world of assemblages, heterogeneous, contingent, performing

an emergent order (cf. **ch. 2**) – a form more adequate than the story to a posthumanist outlook and to the complexities of the Anthropocene.

The essays in this book as a whole go some way toward performing (in) the pinboard mode. And this chapter in particular is conceived as an intimation of what such an approach could look like for a Cultural Studies-investigation of particular phenomena or conjunctures. It assembles some first ‘snapshots’ for a conjunctural analysis of the Corona pandemic, short vignettes that are not much more than initial, very rough outlines meant to indicate the direction – both analytically as well as methodologically – such a study would possibly move in. They are only sketches, intended as springboards, to be fleshed out into much more detailed analyses and complemented by multiple others. What seems clear, however, is that, in the last instance, Cultural Studies would interpret and use the pinboard’s ‘fractional coherence’ somewhat differently from actor-network theory. While certainly sympathetic to Law’s call for an “ability to live and know in tension” (cf. **ch. 1**) and thus for the capacity “to come to terms with an uncomfortable lack of completion” (11, 193), for Cultural Studies, this will never be tantamount to giving up on the “possibility of an overall vision” and to “reconcil[ing] ourselves [...] to the loss of conclusions” (5, 191). In fact, in view of at least Law’s openly political interests, this is perhaps more a difference of emphasis than of basic principle or orientation, but I think it needs to be stressed that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies as I have envisaged it here, which remains determined to constitute a ‘political project’ (Stuart Hall), conclusions continue to be central – contingent and situated ones, always open to additions and revisions, but conclusions nonetheless – and the same holds true for ‘cognitive mapping’ and overall vision – though now, as I explained in the previous chapter, in the sense of an *assembled totality*, not a naïve, expressive one (cf. **ch. 6**). They remain bound and subject to the central Cultural Studies-logic of *articulation*. Articulated conclusions, articulated totalities. Cultural Studies acknowledges that ‘nothing is connected to everything’ (Haraway), but it persists in raising the question ‘What does this have to do with everything else?’ (Hall). It uses the pinboard to gather and juxtapose snippets which retain their autonomy, their status as fragments, which are not integrated into some all-encompassing order or read in terms of an all-controlling logic. But at the same time, it also (inevitably) arranges these pieces in a particular way, by tracing their links, intersections, overlaps, by seeking associations, similarities, and patterns, that is, by inquiring *how exactly* they connect, in which specific manner they are entangled as threads of a mesh, and in this way identifies *determining structures* after all (in the new sense in which I have started using these two terms). Multiplicity and singularity.

Why not explore the possibilities afforded by the pinboard? After all, as Law reminds us, one way or another, “[t]he hands of the storyteller are never clean” (11).

Pin 4: Mask / Cultural Object

Undoubtedly, one of the key elements that have come to define the Covid years is the protective mask, including the oftentimes fierce conflicts and intense polarizations surrounding it. What would it mean to investigate such a ‘cultural object’ within the framework of posthumanist Cultural Studies? How would such an investigation link up with the general endeavor of conjunctural analysis and/as assemblage analysis?

At least since the 1990s, much academic work in Cultural Studies has tended to focus more or less exclusively on the analysis of the *meaning* of cultural artifacts. In the wake of the ‘cultural turn’, each and every phenomenon came to be considered as one more cultural ‘text’ to be deciphered, and its meaning hence more or less solely understood as a question of textual interpretation or ‘reading’. Consequently, power struggles were frequently reduced to (nothing but) struggles over signification, and, in work that justly came to be criticized as a form of ‘cultural populism’ (McGuigan 1992), this struggle was sometimes understood in an exaggeratedly optimistic way, driven by an overly affirmative view of popular culture, mainly expressed in a firm belief in the productive and resistant capacities of audiences and consumers as well as texts themselves. Yet, when, to refer to the most famous example, Paul du Gay and his colleagues inquired into the ‘meaning’ of the Sony Walkman, this was never a question of semiotics or hermeneutics only. Instead, the authors of the famous Open University textbook emphasized, the device was examined principally “as a clue to the study of modern culture in general” (du Gay et al. 1997: 11) – and, as Jeremy Gilbert observes, much Cultural Studies work like this was “motivated by a conception of ‘culture’ as a kind of proxy for the idea of the ‘social totality’, and by the desire to take a whole ensemble of social and expressive relations as an object of investigation” (2019: 12). That is, their name notwithstanding, at least tendentially, these studies were often about more than just ‘culture’. They were driven by a distinct desire to ‘see it whole’ (Toscano 2012). While *Doing Cultural Studies* is undoubtedly centrally concerned with signification and meaning – and perhaps to some extent at the expense of other important aspects – it is clearly also about much else besides (or entangled with) that. It is impelled by a curiosity to know ‘what this – the Sony Walkman – has to do with everything else’.

Pursuing this question, the book goes some way towards an important balancing act: taking the artifact seriously (to echo the phrase I used in ch. 1), while simultaneously treating it, to use Marx’s expression, as “the concentration of many determinations” (1978: 237). The cultural object under investigation is thus of interest in itself, but at the same time it constitutes an “entrance point into the context, an assumed point of articulation or a crystallization of lines of determination” (Grossberg 2010: 26). As Lawrence Grossberg argues, for Cultural Studies, the “traditional notion of an object of study is only the opening [...] through which one enters into the context that is the [actual] object of analysis” (2010: 26). In view of more recent, ‘postcritical’

approaches, I believe it is worth considering in how far it might be fruitful to somewhat temper or modify this view, so that, through a combination or hybridization of ‘critique’ and ‘repair’ (cf. **ch. 3, excursus**), not only the object itself would remain of (more) interest, but the two dimensions would actually cease to be seen as separate and – beyond any simple one-sided determinism – emerge as deeply entangled, as one. A detailed experiment with such a new approach will have to wait for another time. For now, suffice it to note that Cultural Studies generally treats cultural artifacts as points of entry (‘themes’ being another sort of entrance point; see below, pin 5) which “distill or articulate larger moments, movements, contradictions, and struggles [...] at work in the various domains of the social formation [...] and the relations among them” (Grossberg 2010: 26). The concrete object, in other words, “is understood as a phenomenon the analysis of which offers insights into the entire distribution of power relations” (Gilbert 2019: 7) in a given social formation.

The principal analytical model the Walkman book proposed to address this endeavor is the now well-known ‘*circuit of culture*’, with its five key dimensions of *representation*, *identity*, *production*, *consumption*, and *regulation*. In line with my central argument, I believe the circuit still has heuristic value today, nearly 30 years after its introduction, but should now be rethought and developed further through an encounter with the nonhuman turn. The ensuing ‘diffraction’ would first of all re-accentuate the thoroughly *relational* character of the model and emphasize anew that, in keeping with Cultural Studies’ core objective of avoiding determinism and attending to complexity, the different parts of the circuit were never conceived as separate but as parts that “continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways” (du Gay et al. 1997: 4). Thus, as I read it, the circuit always contained the seeds of, or tended towards, what I think it needs to become today: the *assemblage of culture*. This notion focuses attention on the multiple entangled dimensions of a given assemblage, on their inter- and intra-related nature and their processual dynamics, but also on the specific manner and conditions of their articulation (cf. **postscript**). Relations of power, as they thread through and shape the various components of the assemblage, here remain the central concern, but the great weight given to representation in the original circuit of culture is now, not counterbalanced or compensated, since the concentration on signs and discourses remains crucially important, but, for instance in accordance with Levi Bryant’s reconceptualization of power as ‘gravity’ (2014: 184–232), rather complemented and extended by a concern with other, including more-than-human, non-representational (Thrift 2008), forms of power, having to do with, for example, materiality and mattering, infrastructures, algorithms, or affect.

Thus, regarding our case of the Covid mask, it is certainly imperative to investigate its role as a “robustly complex as well as an empty signifier, filled with meanings in nothing short of a rapid and intense semiotic guerilla warfare” (Hay 2021: 365), how, in particular, it quickly came to function as “a signifier of political alle-

giances, scientific literacy, and civic obligation”, its donning and the refusal to do so effectively constituting something like “the confessional medium of the pandemic” (Bennett 2021: 348). But such aspects now need to be analyzed in their multi-faceted interconnections with others that exceed or are not exhausted by *representation*, such as the different performances or enactments of the object, now understood as ‘de-centered’ like the subject, in diverse contexts or sets of practices, its multiple productions in varying ‘object positions’ (cf. Law 2002; Mol 2002), or the relational dynamics of affect which, in their inter-/intraplay with situated bodies and specific socio-material settings, co-constitute meanings and subjectivities, especially within “the various arrangements and set-ups that make affect concretely effective at particular sites of social life” (Slaby/Mühlhoff 2019: 36), in other words, within what has been termed ‘affective arrangements’, that is, “array[s] of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions or other materials that coalesce into [...] coordinated formation[s] of mutual *affecting and being-affected*” (Slaby 2019: 109), orchestrated social material-discursive constellations “as part of which affect is patterned, channeled, and modulated in recurrent and repeatable ways” (Slaby et al. 2019: 5).

These arrangements contribute to the production of particular forms of *identity* or, better, subjecthood (cf. **ch. 2**), which now come into view as human-nonhuman assemblages emerging at the intersection of the different subjectivating effects not only of (dominant as well as alternative) discourses and representations relating to the mask, but also, for instance, of gestures, practices, and of the objects themselves. In the language of actor-network theory, what types of ‘interobjectivity’, what sorts of hybrid, nature-cultural ‘networks’ take shape in our entanglements with the mask? Through detailed explorations of, among other things, the maps of meaning, the forms of sensory perception, the ways of body movement, the affective orientations, and the ideas of spatial and temporal situatedness that transpire in and through these networks, the analysis could then elaborate issues such as transformations in the forms of intersubjectivity, shifting boundaries between the public and the private as well as between self and other, renegotiations of constructions of hygiene, immunity, and the body, or the reentrenchment of hegemonic forms/norms of individualism and entrepreneurial citizenship, centered around long-sedimented notions of personal choice and responsibility (cf. Bennett 2021; Hay 2021).

Discussions relating to the aspect of *consumption* would here not only study the different ways – ‘preferred’, to use Hall’s (1993) classic typology, but also ‘negotiated’, ‘alternative’, and ‘oppositional’ – in which people have ‘read’ and used the mask, but also the ‘vital materiality’ and ‘thing-power’ (Bennett 2010) of the mask itself. They would view the mask as an artifact never entirely exhausted by human usage and semiotics, as an ‘actant’ capable of producing a number of effects, both small and large. Like all the other parts of the circuit/assemblage of culture, the investigation

would thus redefine the very notion of consumption, laying emphasis on the ‘con-’ (Lat. ‘with’, ‘together’) of the word ‘consumption’ and highlighting that consuming, like all forms of action, is inevitably always an ‘acting-with’. More than that, being more mindful of the nonhuman, it would also give a fuller account of the “complex biography” of a cultural object like the mask by being more attentive to those stages of its “life-cycle” (du Gay et al. 1997: 118) that to some extent lie beyond (immediate) human grasp. Thus, inspired, among other things, by the recent fields of ‘media archaeology’ and ‘media geology’ (cf. esp. Parikka 2012, 2015), the posthumanist assemblage of culture would significantly expand the spatial as well as temporal reach of the analysis and inquire also into things like the ‘origins’ as well as the ‘afterlife’ of artifacts. How, for instance do they ‘live on’ as ‘zombie objects’ (Hertz/Parikka 2012) after they have been discarded by humans (cf. **coda**)? In which ways do they continue to ‘(inter-)act’ even after the end of direct human use or ‘consumption’? Here, issues such as the enormous amount of medical waste generated by the pandemic (estimated in 2021 at 7,200 tons every day! [Trafton 2021]), chief among it safety masks, and the hazards for ecosystems and the health of human as well as nonhuman animals entailed by vast quantities of microplastics being released into the environment (most masks are made of non-renewable petroleum-based polymers that are non-biodegradable) (cf., e.g., Dharmaraj et al. 2021; Du et al. 2022) are made part of the investigation.

Correspondingly, on the side of *production*, we now not only ask questions about the manufacturing process itself – where?, who?, how?, under what conditions?, etc. – questions that beyond any doubt remain absolutely central, but, following the dictum that, to paraphrase Jussi Parikka, ‘the materiality of artifacts starts much before artifacts become artifacts’ (2015: 37), we also probe into the nature, (deep) history, source, and circumstances of extraction or (in the case of synthetic materials) fabrication of the *stuff* from which they are made (‘natural resources’, chemicals, etc.) – in our case, especially of the oil used for the production of the polypropylene, the basic material of most protective masks, of the metal used for nose strips, the cotton or other types of fabric, and the paper pulp for the cardboard packaging. In addition, further factors such as the machinery used for manufacture, its origins, raw materials, etc., the precise ‘articulation’ of these machines and the human workers, the materiality of the laborers’ bodies and the processes of their ‘reproduction’, and related aspects come into view as well. In this way, the new approach effectively challenges anthropocentric conceptions of production and consumption, which instead emerge as complex and dynamic assemblages of manifold relations which all the while shuffle a multiplicity of human and more-than-human existents.

Finally, regarding *regulation* – something like the orphan of the original 1997 textbook – the key questions continue to be *who* regulates? (or aspires to regulate or to influence regulation) (the government, pressure groups, lobbies, minorities, etc.), *what* is being regulated? (aspects relating to production, consumption/usage, rep-

resentation, etc.), *how* is it being regulated? (through law or more ‘informal’ means such as cultural norms, by means of consent and/or coercion through repressive apparatuses, etc.), and *what cultural maps of meaning* infuse such forms of regulation? (ideologies and discourses of the state, society and the individual, democracy, freedom, etc.). The ‘how’ in particular here explicitly raises issues of power and control, which, as was argued before (cf. **ch. 2**), now include previously neglected or marginalized concerns such as the concrete actor-networks through which regulation is maintained, infrastructural ‘extrastatecraft’ (Easterling 2016), etc. But regulation also directly refers us to the domain of politics in the conventional sense, that is, to “the general field of public contestation between identifiable and opposing sets of ideas about how social relationships should be ordered” (Gilbert 2008: 8). Here, the mask as biopolitical technology – for we are clearly in the domain of the biopolitical management and regulation of life here – emerged as a focal point or articulation for various social antagonisms. These often revolved around conflicts over notions of personal choice and individual sovereignty, which would appear as intimately bound up with the neoliberal privatization of risk and responsabilization of the individual of the last decades (cf. Bennett 2021). What also transpired in this context, especially (though not exclusively) in Germany, was the persistence of what – in analogy to notions such as ‘Thatcherism’ – some scholars have termed ‘*Merkelism*’: a particular mode of crisis management marked by a technocratic and pragmatist, even opportunistic, approach, a decided orientation towards consensus, and an unwavering commitment to neoliberalism and the interests of capital (Ege/Gallas 2019; Werner 2018). During the pandemic, the fundamentally de-politicizing tendencies of this political strategy emerged most clearly in the central role accorded to ‘experts’ and ‘facts’. While the importance of scientific research for political decision-making in contexts like these is beyond question, it was nevertheless striking how *Merkelism* mobilized science to effectively *dispense with* politics insofar as it ignored the ‘worldly’, ‘situated’, and as such inevitably political nature of scientific practice, with all knowledge consequently being contingent, partial, and provisional, and, by simply ‘following the facts’, once again confined politics within the bounds of functionalist reason and limited it to administration and the preservation of the status quo (cf. Di Cesare 2021: 50–55; Klement 2020). What was thus largely prevented (not least also by the bypassing of parliament) were open and broad, properly *democratic* deliberations, not only about the science and the actual process of active *decision-making* – what Donatella Di Cesare refers to as “the torment of decision, the burden of responsibility”, which, she points out, is “the cornerstone of politics” (2021: 55) – but also about more fundamental, ‘structural’ issues such as the state and nature of the healthcare system or, indeed, questions relating to ‘how we want to live’ as a society. Once again, in other words, *Merkelism* emerged as an effective preventer of ‘antagonism’ and thus as a rigorously ‘post-political’ mode of politics – and, all crises and apparent signs of ‘exhaustion’ (Ege/Gallas 2019) notwithstanding, one

that, in Germany as elsewhere, continues well after the departure from the political sphere of Angela Merkel herself (cf. Werner 2021; see also below, pin 6).

Thus, the circuit of culture, reworked into a posthumanist assemblage of culture, remains a valuable tool for the study of individual artifacts as well as a helpful starting point for the analysis of a given conjuncture, since the object in question is always considered ‘conjuncturally’ – as an articulation point of many lines of determination and hence as offering an entry into the complex web of power relations that is a conjuncture.

Pin 5: Moral Panic / Theme

Besides cultural artifacts, another way to ‘enter’ a conjuncture by interweaving the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the general, is through the analysis of what Moritz Ege and Alexander Gallas have termed ‘*themes*’. These are understood as key processes or phenomena “around which contradictions coalesce that characterise a distinct conjuncture” (Ege/Gallas 2019: 92). Such themes – like ‘mugging’ in *Policing the Crisis* or the so-called European ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 in Ege’s and Gallas’ investigation – allow the analyst to access a specific, broader ‘object of analysis’ – the general crisis of hegemony of the British social formation in the former case, the ‘exhaustion of Merkelism’ in the latter – and thus to begin to unlock the conjuncture, in which the object is central, but whose complexity is nevertheless not exhausted by it (Ege/Gallas 2019: 92).

I would propose that with regards to the present moment, one fruitful theme that can be identified are the ‘anti-Corona’ protests, that is, the oftentimes fierce demonstrations against the political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (compulsory mask-wearing and self-testing, lockdowns, vaccination campaigns, etc.). Especially in the years 2020 and 2021, these protests took place in countries across the world, often attracted large numbers of people, from various backgrounds, and repeatedly assumed hostile and aggressive, sometimes violent, form. Certainly, an analysis of the protests needs to proceed in a contextualizing manner, taking into account the respective locally (nationally/culturally) and temporally specific conditions and articulations. Although there is no room for a fully-fledged discussion here, I nevertheless want to suggest that in the context of the ‘West’ or ‘Global North’, these protests, especially in their concern with morality and the line between the permissible and the unacceptable, and in their intense, frequently near-hysterical animosity against ‘the elites’, often marked by “a certain religious fervour” (McRobbie/Thornton 1995: 567), can productively be read through the heuristic prism of *moral panic theory*. This analytic approach first emerged in the work of sociologists such as Jock Young and Stanley Cohen in the early 1970s and has over time differentiated into various strands. Within the field of Cultural Studies, in which it has a rich history (partic-

ularly in relation to the study of subcultures), moral panics – that is, the relatively uninhibited and spontaneous, ‘maverick’ forms of ‘collective behavior’ (Goode/Ben-Yehuda 2009: 130) that react against perceived threats to the principal value system and social fabric of a given society – are mainly understood as a key form in which a more deep-seated historical crisis appears and is experienced by social actors (Hall et al. 1978: 221). It is, as the authors of *Policing the Crisis* put it, a “surface manifestation[n]” of such crisis, a “displacement of a conjunctural crisis into [a] popular form” (Hall et al. 1978: 221). As I will explain in more detail in a moment, it seems to me that this is a potentially helpful way to begin an investigation of the issue of the anti-Corona protests.

At the same time, such an investigation would arguably also need to entail a number of modifications and updates of the approach itself. Such a process of revision could take its cue from Angela McRobbie’s and Sarah Thornton’s 1995 essay “Rethinking ‘Moral Panic’ for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds”, which, though 30 years old by now, remains an important reference point for the debate. As I see it, the three main aspects discussed by McRobbie and Thornton – a reconsideration of moral panic theory’s understanding of ‘society’, the ‘media’, and the relationship between reality and representation – continue to be key issues today. Indeed, it would seem as if a central development in the decades that have passed since the publication of their article was an intensification of the processes of complexification they described. Above all, McRobbie and Thornton take issue with moral panic theory’s monolithic and totalizing conception of society and the mass media as well as moral panics and argue for the need to recognize that “each of the categories described by moral panics theorists has undergone a process of fissure” and that the more or less stable and clear-cut set of relations these theorists traditionally focused on – between the media, agents of social control, moral entrepreneurs, and scapegoats or ‘folk devils’ – has hence “given way to a much more complicated and fragmented set of connections” (1995: 567). In view of these, they argue, it is now necessary to take into account the “diversification of forms of media and the sophisticated restructuring of various categories of audience” and “to acknowledge the perspectives and articulations of different sectors of society” and “the plurality and divergences of opinion that characterize today’s (and probably yesterday’s) ‘moral panics’” (1995: 573, 567, 569). Observations such as these can certainly be said to anticipate what we may perhaps call, taking up Habermas’ (1989) well-known phrase from the 1980s, the ‘new obscurity’ (*die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*) of the current socio-cultural-political landscape, in other words, the fact that this landscape presents a much more muddled and messy picture than, say, in the 1970s or 80s, as political factions have fragmented and multiplied, and the ideological fronts between camps have become blurred and shifting, so that time-honored categories and distinctions such as ‘left’ and ‘right’, while certainly not irrelevant, have undoubtedly lost some of their power to map and explain the social field. This is particularly evident in the case of the demonstra-

tions against the Corona health mandates, where the groups of protestors were frequently marked by irritating coalitions and ideological interferences or, as Diedrich Diederichsen (2015) has it, by unprecedented ‘post-ideological cross-fronts’ (cf. also Amlinger/Nachtwey 2025). Relatedly, when McRobbie and Thornton criticize the undertheorized role of the audience in the traditional models of moral panic, in which it generally “played a minor role” and was essentially reduced to “the space of consensus”, and make the case that “a new model need embrace the complex realm of reception”, including “the disparate perspectives of different mass, niche and micro-media” and thus “the discovery and effective representation of niches of opinion and identity” (1995: 572, 568), their deliberations arguably already point in the direction of what I would claim is the urgent contemporary requirement to rethink moral panics in the age of digitalization, of ‘convergence culture’ and ‘participatory culture’ (cf. Jenkins 2006), and of a ‘new structural transformation of the public sphere’ (Habermas 2023), especially by exploring the now central role of the social media in the ‘signification spirals’ described by Hall and his colleagues, that is, the processes of amplifying the threat of social events through particular mechanisms of representation such as ‘convergence’ or ‘thresholds’ (Hall et al. 1978: 223–27). While moral panic scholarship long neglected these important developments, recent work has begun to remedy this omission and to explore the ways in which digital technologies and cultures affect the processes in which moral panics take place (cf., e.g., Falkof 2020; Hier 2018; Ingraham/Reeves 2016; Walsh 2020). As Nicky Falkof, for one, observes in an important contribution: “Claims-making has changed; moral entrepreneurship is no longer restricted to certain types of people; elite mediation is no longer a necessary component of the panic; and moral panics can spread faster and more widely than ever before.” (2020: 228)

In the context of such ‘new obscurity’ and a fragmented, re-arranging public sphere, the old assumption of a more or less straight-forward relation (binary, asymmetrical, unidirectional) between the ‘control culture’ on the one hand and unruly sub- or countercultures on the other no longer seems viable. What is particularly important to acknowledge is the fact that, as (social) media ‘prosumers’, a plurality of actors are now able to ‘make their voices heard’ and to influence or contest particular discourses, narratives, and regimes of representation, so that moral panics are today a much more volatile and embattled affair, to the extent that, in analogy to Cultural Studies’ well-known phrase about hegemony, one is almost tempted to speak of a ‘struggle for/over panic’. Importantly, this also means that the stoking of moral panics is no longer the prerogative of ‘the authorities’ alone. As McRobbie and Thornton already point out, “moral panics [...] are not necessarily hegemonic” (1995: 569). Instead, “niche and micro-media can [...] attempt to incite their own moral panics” (McRobbie/Thornton 1995: 568). In particular, as Chris Ingraham and Joshua Reeves note, “mobile and social media [have] dealt an important blow to the elite mass media’s monopoly over panic production” (2016: 459). Thus, in the case of the

anti-Corona movement, we can identify the emergence of a complex ecology of actants, spinning a multi-pronged web of communication, which fueled what we may call ‘a moral panic *from below*’. Here, the classical elements and relations of the traditional moral panic model are almost upended: Rather than “the top-down, hegemonically driven methods of social control outlined by Hall et al. (1978), in which primary definers collaborated with the mass media to delineate the object of the panic and communicate this information to the public” (Falkof 2020: 228), what we had in this case was a “participatory, crowd-sourced pani[c]” (Walsh 2020: 846), in which what could formerly still be conceived as the ‘audience’ transpired not as a passive ‘space of consensus’ but as the active motor of the panic, and in which the technomanagerial ‘political class’ (cf. Gilbert/Williams 2022: 6f, *passim*), often dubbed ‘the elite’, itself came to play something like the role of the folk devil³. Analogous to my overall argument, it would thus seem that the analysis of moral panics, too, could profit from a novel heuristic, a new ‘way of seeing’ better able to capture the unstable and shifting dynamics of the contemporary socio-cultural field. Again, a topological instead of a topographical vocabulary will be helpful here. Once again, let us heed Cultural Studies’ dictum of ‘no necessary correspondence’, locating ourselves in its characteristic ‘third space’ (cf. **ch. 6**), and hence move beyond both, the notion of an essentially static socius of old, comprising more or less settled positions, fixed identities, and stable relations (mostly binary), but also beyond those alternative imaginaries that conceive the social landscape and its relations as fundamentally liquid, uncentered, and rhizomatic. Instead, proceeding from the cultural logic of articulation, perhaps a terminology such as the one developed by Arjun Appadurai, who, in his influential investigations of the cultural dimensions of globalization, speaks of a number of different ‘flows’ and ‘-scapes’ (1996, esp. 27–47), can offer a helpful starting point, allowing us to move the study of moral panics towards a mode of analysis revolving around ‘stabilizations’ (rather than stability), ‘positionalities’ (rather than positions), ‘identiscapes’ and ‘affectscapes’ (rather than identities and [affective] communities), ‘mediascapes’ (rather than sharp boundaries between types of media, producers and consumers, etc.), ‘ideoscapes’ (rather than ideologies only), and related notions, all understood as tenuous and only ever temporary.

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- 3 As Falkof aptly points out, “the relation between folk devils and moral panics is not always clear-cut”; the folk devil can be difficult to pin down, they may be imaginary or even non-existent, or conditions, episodes, issues, or acts rather than actors can serve their purpose (2020: 229). The latter was arguably the case with the measures taken to combat the coronavirus – nevertheless, the notion of a diffuse ‘elite’, consisting of politicians, medical ‘experts’, journalists of the ‘mainstream’ media, managers of cultural institutions, etc., simultaneously often came to play the role of a more concrete folk devil. Again, also regarding the concept of the folk devil, it would seem that moral panic theory is in need of a more flexible and complex framework, capable of capturing a plurality of figurations, different layers, contexts, functions, and so forth.

As I see it, a re-accentuation of the key logic of articulation is likewise central for tackling the third aspect of moral panic theory that requires revision identified by McRobbie and Thornton. The two scholars criticize analysts of moral panics for their “call for an account which tells how life actually is, and which deals with the real issues rather than the spectacular and exaggerated ones” and point out that “[t]hese versions of ‘reality’ would also be impregnated with the mark of media imagery rather than somehow pure and untouched by the all-pervasive traces of contemporary communications” (1995: 570f). This critique resonates with others that have been made over the years, for instance regarding moral panic theory’s (at least implied) assumption of the disproportionality of the social reaction under investigation. After all, to call something a ‘panic’ is usually to suggest that the concern and reactive behavior are exaggerated, inappropriate, even irrational, not warranted by a realistic, sober assessment. Even if only implicitly, the approach thus invokes a true and objective reality, one to which the analyst has access, but not the participants of the panic. As formulations such as Hall’s famous assertion that “[r]ace is [...] the modality in which class is ‘lived’” (1980: 341) or the claim made in *Policing the Crisis* that panics such as the one about mugging effectively constituted a “political and ideological distortion”, a series of “false ‘resolutions’” (1978: 322), indicate – or at least certain readings of such phrases⁴ – there is, in the wake of the Althusserian reconceptualization of ideology infusing many of these statements, a trace of the idea of ‘false consciousness’ still distinctly at work in this type of analysis. In this vein, Philip Jenkins has drawn attention to what he sees as the “inherent ideological bias” of the approach and to the “ideological vested interest in debunking or exposing” of most of its practitioners, and pointed out that “moral panic theory was always founded on a set of implicit value judgments, which assumed that the subject of analysis must, by definition, be somehow bogus or exaggerated” (2009: 36). Yet, as we well know, the notion of an objective truth, accounting for the world ‘as it really is’, is untenable. Even empirical ‘evidence’ and ‘pure’ data – as, for instance, the controversy around Hall et al.’s use of statistics in *Policing the Crisis* already illustrates (cf., e.g., Waddington 1986) – are, we have long come to understand, far less evidential and pure than one may assume.

Where to, then, with moral panic analysis? I believe that it is possible to preserve what I see as the strengths of the approach while at the same time avoiding those as-

4 As I will explain shortly, especially in relation to *Policing the Crisis*, I opt for a different reading. Regarding the first claim mentioned here, I would, against interpretations that understand this statement as pointing to the *essential* and *determining* role of the economic (and material) as against the ‘merely’ cultural (and discursive), (re-)read it as pointing to the inextricable entanglement of the former and the latter. That is to say, “‘race’ enters not only in the determination of how class is ‘lived’, ‘experienced’ or ‘fought through’, but in how ‘class’ itself is constituted” (Harris/James 1993: 4), and both must be construed as material-discursive.

pects which appear rather problematic. It seems to me that moral panic theory remains valuable as a highly useful approach for the study of episodes which contain a strong moral dimension – “the thing that is feared poses a threat to an established order or a group identity that is seen as ‘good’” (Falkof 2020: 234f) – and the element of panic. However, the latter need not immediately be taken to imply illegitimate exaggeration and irrational hysteria, but rather, more neutrally, that “the thing that is feared is amplified via an affect-driven collective response that increases in intensity as it spreads” (Falkof 2020: 235). As I see it, it is first of all the dynamics, mechanisms, and possible reasons of this amplification that are the main concern of the analyst, not the degree of appropriateness of the response itself. In an important early contribution to these debates, also referred to by McRobbie and Thornton, Simon Watney argued:

Moral panic theory is always obliged in the final instance to refer and contrast ‘representation’ to the arbitration of ‘the real’, and is hence unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within all representational systems. Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of *permanent* ideological struggle over the meaning of signs. (1987: 41f)

Proceeding from this latter key point, McRobbie and Thornton, citing Watney, suggest that a moral panic “is best seen as a local intensification or ‘the site of the current front line’ rather than a sudden, unpleasant and unanticipated development” (1995: 564). I believe that this take on moral panics also allows us to retain what I consider to be the approach’s most productive analytic move, namely the relation of such episodes to other, often ‘larger’, issues, all the while remaining true to our post-false consciousness, non-condescending, more ‘reparatively’ (cf. **ch. 3, excursus**) oriented understanding of ‘panic’. In this context, moral panic theory could certainly profit from a closer dialogue not only with psychoanalysis but also affect theory. Falkof, for instance, has suggested that, rather than as overreactions, it is more useful to think of moral panics in terms of *displacements*, in the sense that “[s]eemingly overblown or hysterical fears can stand in for realities that are less lurid and fantastic but may feel as though they pose a greater risk to society” (2020: 234). In fact, though, the logic of displacement already appears in early moral panic work such as *Policing the Crisis*, in which, following Althusser’s post-Lacanian conception of ideology, ideological forms of experience such as moral panics are understood along the lines of “an inflection or misrepresentation of real relations, a displacement of the class struggle” (Hall et al. 1978: 322). However, as is evident here, the concept of ‘displacement’ ultimately still remains tied to false consciousness (and, in this case, a residual economic determinism). Yet, I believe that if we emphasize the notion of ‘inflection’ rather than that of ‘misrepresentation’, an alternative reading opens up. In this reconceptualization, moral panics become a question not so much of displace-

ment, but of *articulation*. The socius is an ever-dynamic force-field of shifting (power) relations, which, in particular conjunctures, rearrange so as to produce more and heightened forms of tension and conflict, along with affective landscapes and structures of feeling that can include emotions such as widespread anxiety, strain, or fear, so that the given moment may come to be felt and/or coded (or articulated) as ‘crisis’. Rather than from manipulation or ‘misrecognition’, a moral panic emerges out of an articulation of such affective-material-semiotic dynamics to specific concrete phenomena. They are a mode of articulation, not a symptom. Like the social, the subject and subjectivity are *assemblages*, territorialized and deterritorialized through constant processes of dis/articulation. As Jasbir Puar explains in her critique of identitarian paradigms and her critical engagement with the heuristic of ‘intersectionality’, the concept of the ‘assemblage’, read through the lens of the ‘affective turn’, allows us to properly think the “affective ideation of identity”, where, given the ontological primacy of processuality, “position is but one derivative of systems in constant motion” (2007: 215). It allows us “to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities”, to “interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body” (Puar 2007: 215, 212). I would argue that these should become a central element of the study of moral panics. If subjectivities, as assemblages, are “collections of multiplicities”, “series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks” (Puar 2007: 211), then moral panics can be understood as reorganizations of precisely these networks, as processes of reassembling that take place through the forging of new linkages. They constitute, as Hall and his colleagues argued, an intervention into ongoing struggles over hegemony, but struggles that are now taken to encompass a ‘politics of affect’ and a ‘politics of matter’ (Papadopoulos 2014, 2018), involving conflict over the ‘partition of the sensible’ (Rancière 1999) and the ‘worlding’ of reality itself (cf. **postsript**).

I believe that rethought along these lines, as a rearticulation/*reagencement*, a moment of intensification and condensation of ongoing dynamics and struggles, moral panic can still, or once again, offer a useful heuristic framework, one that, as part of the endeavor of conjunctural analysis, allows us to investigate what we have termed a ‘theme’ in terms of a point of entry into what was called the ‘object of analysis’. In our case, the phenomenon of the anti-Corona protests, what would such an investigation look like? What could the larger object of analysis be? In this short vignette, I will once again only be able to sketch the direction in which the analysis may move.

Certainly, the protests that took place in Germany and elsewhere in 2020/21 qualify as a ‘moral panic’, given that they contained a deep moral as well as a strong affective element: They were marked by intense and quasi-viral feelings of “anxiety, worry, concern and alarm”, a “sense of urgency, the feeling that there is a risk to one’s community and way of life and that something must be done about it before it has disastrous consequences”, and these feelings were not just about “fears for the

safety of the self, the family or the immediate community”, but about “a perceived threat to a system of values that is understood as being intrinsic to the functioning of society”, a threat to “*the polis as a whole*” (Falkof 2020: 231, 230). And here, too, the characteristic representational maneuvers described by Cohen regarding the objects of the moral panic could be observed:

They are *new* (lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging in *themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition. They are *transparent* (anyone can see what’s happening) – but also *opaque*: accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless [...]. (2011: viif)

Like most moral panics of the past, the one about the Corona measures was essentially ‘conservative’ in nature: It was marked by an affirmative relation to existing structures of power and privilege (Daub 2022: 33), which hence were to be preserved. There was a sustained ground tone of fear about an impending loss of control – to red-green elites, globalists, Jews, and others – and a persistent sense that what was happening in Germany and elsewhere was ‘no longer normal’. In my view, these aspects are absolutely central. In fact, I would argue that – though they should certainly not simply be conflated – at this point, this specific moral panic resonates and links up with several others that have emerged in the recent past, for instance regarding migration (condensed in relation to the 2015 ‘summer of migration’ and the events at Cologne Cathedral during New Year’s Eve in the same year [cf. Ege/Gallas 2019]), ‘gender mania’ (*Genderwahn*, e.g. in connection with the ‘gendering’ of the German language), ‘wokeness’ and ‘cancel culture’, or the rise of a green ‘climate dictatorship’. It seems to me that feelings of an increasing loss of control and of an expanding erosion of normality are at the heart of all of these. Here, I believe these panics articulate and condense what are in fact much broader contemporary ideo-affectsapes. “Take back control”, the Brexiteers proclaimed. “Deutschland. Aber normal.”, demanded the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland. In the academy, too, talk of ‘post-normal times’ (Sardar 2019) is doing the rounds, and a left-leaning scholar like Alex Demirovič (2020) speaks of several recent ‘denormalization crises’ while another, William Davies (2021), discusses what he describes as the collapse of liberalism in Britain and elsewhere under the title *This Is Not Normal*. It would appear as if the sense of an ‘end of normality’ is becoming a diagnosis and (structure of) feeling widely shared across different social milieus and politi-

cal camps. And clearly, the very normality at stake here – its meaning and limits, whether it is to be defended or not, etc. – is a site of intense contestation.⁵

Of course, as Stephan Lessenich (2022)⁶, whose work is an indispensable resource in this context, emphasizes, normality is socially produced, the effect of ongoing processes of *normalization* – as such, it is inherently political. And it is precisely this manufacture of normality that, in a time experienced by many in the so-called ‘Global North’ as one of chronic crisis, has now stalled. The established ‘order of normality’ is in decline and we stand at the “beginning of a new era of normality politics” (*Beginn der neuen normalitätspolitischen Zeitrechnung*; Lessenich 2022: 39). In this context, the Corona protests, along with other moral panics of recent years, effectively represent something like “nervous convulsions” of a “society on the brink of postnormality” (Lessenich 2022: 125). They are manifestations of a tenacious “will to normality” and an expression of a powerful “anti-denormalizing affect” (Lessenich 2022: 12, 126). In their efforts to describe such and related movements, including what is frequently characterized as a new populism of the right, scholars have recently returned to the concept of ‘ressentiment’ (cf., e.g., Amlinger/Nachtwey 2025, esp. 104–06; Lessenich 2022: 126–28; Vogl 2022). While, on the one hand, following the influential work of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Max Scheler, the central elements of this affect – “negating self-affirmation, deferred impulse to act, envy of life, tendency to delegate, and addiction to apportioning blame” (Vogl 2022: 118) – have often been seen as structurally connected with modern capitalism per se – intimately related to the economic imperative to valorize, compare, and compete, and fulfilling an essentially system-stabilizing function by deflecting anger from the market and directing it towards scapegoats – they have, on the other hand, in the past also repeatedly been analyzed in a more ‘conjunctural’ manner. For an investigation of the – highly volatile – affective landscapes of the current conjuncture, the concept of ‘ressentiment’ is therefore doubtlessly very productive. Yet, it is critical not to diagnose such essentially ‘regressive’ reactions to the crisis of normality for the political ‘extremes’ alone.⁷ Instead, it has to be emphasized that regressive impulses are at work in much present-day government action and the attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles of social majorities as well, so that we must in fact acknowledge a profound complicity between the ‘radical and dangerous margins’ and the – especially in Germany quasi-mythical (Lessenich 2022: 35–37) – ‘moderate’ middle-class

5 Following Grossberg’s scheme, we could say that the issue of normality constitutes a ‘problematic’. A problematic is a “conceptual knot [...] that animates particular struggles”; they “operate across and are dispersed among the sites of the war of positions” (Grossberg 2019: 52).

6 In all the following quotations from Lessenich’s study, the translations are mine.

7 And indeed, as Ingolfur Blühdorn (2024) has argued in an important recent intervention, the very attribute of ‘regressive’ itself should not go unproblematicized (see the discussion below).

'center'. As Ingolfur Blühdorn – whose writings deserve much attention in this context as they constantly challenge us to critically question our own assumptions and narratives (esp. 2000, 2013, 2024; Blühdorn et al. 2020) – observes, “the suspicion arises that the *immoral* and *de-civilized* mob is perhaps taking on a dirty job that the cultivated bourgeoisie rejects out of hand, but which is nevertheless indispensable to them”⁸ (2020: 18, my trans.).

In my reading, the *loss of normality* which calls forth “the regressive syndrome” (Lessenich 2022: 124f) is the (/an) ‘object of analysis’ we can ‘enter’ through the discussion of our ‘theme’ of the Corona protests. Whereas, in their bestselling study *Triggerpunkte*, Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux, and Linus Westheuser identify violations of normality as only one among four key contemporary ‘trigger points’ (2023: 253–60), it seems to me that the role of today’s ‘struggles over normality’ goes well beyond this and that, as something like a superordinate ‘nodal point’ articulating a number of different affects, discourses, ideologies, and struggles, they effectively constitute one crucial way of beginning the work of mapping the current conjuncture (though emphatically not in the sense of another master key that allows us to unlock more or less everything). ‘The normal’ is one of the central battlefields of our time. A crucial category for understanding the often regressive attempts to defend normality is that of *loss*. As Andreas Reckwitz, who has taken some first steps in such a direction, has pointed out, we are in need of a ‘sociology of loss’.⁹ While, as in much of his writing, the level of abstraction on which Reckwitz works is mostly a significantly higher one than that of the conjuncture, his thought nevertheless constitutes a very helpful resource. In particular, I am here thinking of his characterization of ‘late modernity’ in terms of a combination of intensified ‘loss sensitization’ as well as ‘loss escalation’, his identification of a social ‘dynamic of loss’, which, importantly, entails conflicts about which losses are recognized, considered legitimate, and get politically addressed (e.g., through restitution or reversal), his description of the usually negative ‘affects of loss’, including sorrow, anger, fear (including fear of loss itself), or resentment, and the argument that the painful experience of loss is almost always also a loss of identity, as well as his observation that there is a range of different ‘practices of loss’ or socio-cultural ways of ‘doing loss’, including nostalgia and the politicization of loss (Reckwitz 2021a, 2022). Reckwitz also emphasizes the range of what can be lost, and it would seem that just such a plurality of different losses is at stake in the current struggles over normality. Trying to preserve ‘what’s normal’ very often means trying to hold on to things that are slipping away – *economic* losses;

8 The original reads as follows: “Aber der Verdacht drängt sich auf, dass der *unmoralische* und *entzivilisierte* Pöbel hier vielleicht eine dreckige Arbeit übernimmt, die das gepflegte Bürgertum zwar weit von sich weist, die ihm aber doch unverzichtbar ist.”

9 More recently (after this chapter had already been completed), Reckwitz (2024) significantly expanded his initial reflections into a full monograph.

political losses, including forms of hegemony, not least in a geopolitical sense; *social* losses, involving status, recognition, privilege, and power; and, just as important, *cultural* losses, having to do with established narratives and maps of meaning, received modes of perception, interpretation, and experience, as well as with feelings of order, stability, and control, and with traditional horizons of expectation, especially regarding the future. In that sense, many of today's political movements can (also) be seen as movements motivated by loss (Reckwitz 2022: 18). In a similar vein, John Clarke has even suggested that "[t]his 'sense of loss' might be what Williams once called the 'structure of feeling' of the present moment" (2019: 139).

Crucially, there is something 'hauntological' to the 'normalcy revolt' that reacts against all these different losses. The regressive responses are also driven by a hauntedness of the normal itself, by a feeling that the self-evident may not be entirely self-evident after all. As Reckwitz (2021b) has observed, the present is certainly a moment of profound disillusionment for the 'Global North', in the sense of both, a moment of pessimism and of an end of illusions. And this wearing away of illusions concerns normality itself, because what has today become ever harder to ignore is that 'Western' normalcy in virtually all of its dimensions – its freedom, its values, its prosperity, its ways of life – was always based on, and could only ever be maintained through, a variety of forms of oppression, exploitation, and an externalization of costs (social, ecological, economic). It was at all times upheld at the expense of others (Lessenich 2019) – be it groups of people that are racialized or gendered as different from the white, male, cis, heterosexual norm, migrants and 'guest workers', the 'Global South', the more-than-human world (climate, soils, animals, plants, etc.), or, indeed, future generations (cf. **ch. 5**). And this fact of living from the work and resources of others and from offloading damage onto others, this truth that we "do 'well' or are better-off *because* others do 'badly' or are worse-off" (Lessenich 2019: 12), could – the countless critiques articulated within the 'Global South' and various academic discourses notwithstanding – for long more or less successfully be kept at bay by a 'veil of deliberate ignorance' (Lessenich 2019: 43–53) in which 'we' have shrouded ourselves. Now, however, this veil has been torn in many places. And this is so because increasingly, as there are "no longer any 'internal' or 'external' social relationships, if indeed they ever existed", but only "asymmetrical internal *global* relationships" (Lessenich 2019: 36), the consequences of 'Western' normality are finally coming home – whether in the form of the growth of economic problems and the increasing frequency of economic crises, the mounting struggles for social participation (which are always struggles over symbolic *and* material resources – the common separation is artificial), greater migratory movements, or accelerating climate change and loss of biodiversity. It is a veritable return of the repressed. The recognition now dawns on more and more that there was absolutely nothing 'normal' about our normalcy. "Welcome to the desert of the real." (*The Matrix*)

Pin 6: Conjuncture / Epoch

Many in the 'West', used to understanding their privileges as a given (or, more precisely, not seeing them *as privileges* to begin with – cf. Peggy McIntosh's well-known metaphor of the 'invisible knapsack'), experience the profound shift outlined in pin 5 as a serious insult, an imposition, an attack on their very identity (which of course it is). This, I have argued, is a central factor in what I have called today's struggles over normality. As we have seen, the erosion of normalcy is an overdetermined process, tied up with developments in a number of different domains (cultural, economic, political, social, ecological, etc.), and the struggles, too, are hence multiple. It is not least because of this that it constitutes a highly illuminating 'object of analysis' for unpacking the current conjuncture. Once again using the notion of the assemblage or network, I suggest we consider normality as something like a 'nodal point' which 'articulates' a plurality of processes – and importantly, I would argue that these interlinked processes are of varying scope or are located on, or can be looked at in terms of, different levels of abstraction. In our case, it seems to me that we are faced with developments which are best described as 'conjunctural', but also with others which appear to be rather 'epochal' in character (cf. Grossberg 2019). Yet, I would contend that what they all have in common is that they mark the present moment as an essentially liminal or transitional one, as what, adopting Gramsci's term, is perhaps best characterized as an 'interregnum', in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci 1971: 276). Here, I believe that the sensitivity for complexity inherent to the method of conjunctural analysis, its attention to what may be called the 'cultural logic of hybridity' (Reckwitz 2006: 19) and to the 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' (Ernst Bloch), compel us to skepticism vis-à-vis hasty periodizations and to look closer. In the face of the Corona pandemic, many commentators advanced more or less 'grand' pronouncements such as the onset of the 'Coronascene' (Anderson 2020)¹⁰ or 'Virocene' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2020), of an "epic moment in world history" (Miller 2021: 1), or a "caesura in the time of our species on this planet" (Mitchell 2021: 98). Meanwhile, scholars explicitly working with conjunctural analysis have spoken of the unfolding of a 'pandemic conjuncture' (Means/Slater 2021; Probyn 2021: 567) and of an 'epochal' or 'organic crisis' pointing to the "untenability of the current global order" (Ang 2021: 599). "This", Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams declare, "is the global crisis of neoliberalism" (2022: vii). In their eyes, "[w]e are in a moment of grand realignment, where different cycles of world history have clicked together to produce a rare instant where more or less anything could be possible." (2022: vii)

10 However, while he uses the term 'Coronascene', it should be noted that Anderson is actually skeptical of such large-scale pronouncements.

Obviously, the mapping of the current conjuncture requires a lot of precise, detailed, contextualizing, trans-/postdisciplinary, and collective work. I believe that, on the whole, Gilbert's and Williams' intervention, for one, is an incredibly valuable contribution to this effort. Yet, to make just one general observation, I think that, perhaps just as much as the rupture, the change, and the novelty, what needs to be brought out more strongly are the continuities, the persistence of the established, and the radical openness of the current situation. For is not one of the key characteristics of our interregnum its zombie-like side (cf. *codā*), that is, the refusal of the old to really die? It is without doubt true that on both, the level of the conjuncture and of the epoch (to adopt this heuristic distinction for the time being), profound changes are taking place. Surely, for instance, since around the time of the financial crisis of 2007/08, and even more so during the last ten years, a certain neoliberal consensus, formed in the 1980s and consolidated in the 'long 1990s', which had already for long been upheld through more passive and disaffected rather than active modes of consent, became seriously fractured. In particular, the so-called 'political class', which since the 80s played a central part in the maintenance of this consensus by establishing a centrist, technocratic mode of politics, has, especially with the rise of a new 'authoritarian populism' (Stuart Hall) from the right, increasingly lost control of the situation. Gilbert and Williams (2022), Nancy Fraser (2019), and others have worked this out excellently. Yet, whether this erosion of consent automatically means a crisis of neoliberal hegemony, or even a crisis of capitalism, as these and other analysts suggest¹¹, is, in my view, an open question. Different alternatives to the hitherto dominant constellation of 'progressive neoliberalism' (Nancy Fraser) – the fusion of a socially liberal with an economically liberal agenda – are not only imaginable but already visible. And indeed, seen from today, it is not even clear whether this variant of neoliberalism and the 'political class' managerial, technocratic style of governing are really on their last legs. While, especially in the wake of Brexit, the victory of Donald Trump, and the political successes of right-wing, autocratic parties and movements in many countries in Europe and beyond, it may have initially seemed that way, we have more recently, for instance with the election of Joe Biden in the US, the losses of PIS in the 2023 general election in Poland, or the 2024 European Parliament election, in parts also seen a reassertion of the hold of the old 'center'. In Germany, too, while the political management mode of 'Merkelism' for some time seemed to have exhausted itself (Ege/Gallas 2019), with the 'traffic light coalition' (Social Democratic Party, Free Democratic Party, and Green Party) and Olaf Scholz as chancellor, we effectively witnessed a continuation of a very similar pragmatist, opportunistic

11 To be fair, Gilbert and Williams waver on this point. They repeatedly strike a more skeptical note, but by and large tend to diagnose a crisis of hegemony.

tic, de-politicizing style of decision-making.¹² This, as the journalist Bernd Ulrich has called it, is “technocracy in the stage of futility” (2024b, my trans.) – “Scholz is the last attempt at/of a fading normality” (2024a, my trans.). One may be tempted to read such developments in terms of a ‘last gasp’ – but this could also be wish-/fearful thinking. In the interregnum, things are over- as well as underdetermined (Clarke 2019: 136). Instead of a radical break, or at least a break that is uniform and has a definite meaning and direction, what I believe we are confronted with is a complex, hybrid, and dynamic situation in which what we are actually faced with is the simultaneity and overlapping of several different logics and processes, including the coexistence of what Anton Jäger (2023) has identified as different political ‘modes’: ‘post-politics’, ‘anti-politics’, ‘hyper-politics’ (and, perhaps, once again ‘mass-politics’?). The current political changes – which are no doubt real – are overdetermined; they are not a question of neoliberal capitalism alone (cf., e.g., Blühdorn 2024, esp. 125–36, 308–26; Manow 2020; Schäfer/Zürn 2021). Whether they will turn into or be part of an organic or hegemonic crisis – indeed, whether they will (continue to) be experienced as a ‘crisis’ at all – all this – that is one point conjunctural analysis emphasizes – is a question not of any automatism, but of *articulation*. And the hopes of many on the left notwithstanding, it is perfectly possible that, despite all the ostensibly ‘de-normalizing’ developments of the recent past, the undead normalcy of old will continue to linger on. After all, as I already indicated in the previous pin, whether it is the pandemic, the financial crisis, migration, the climate emergency, or the war in Ukraine – even though in all of these cases the repressed is finally returning, the truth is that generally, the governmental and social response was/is each time decidedly *not* marked by a fundamental change of direction but – against all knowledge about its disastrous effects – by the attempt to defend and preserve normality.

Deflating many of the assumptions, categories, narratives, and expectations of ‘progressively-minded’ people, Ingolfur Blühdorn (2024)¹³ has in a critical recent intervention argued that it is precisely this, the more or less unwavering commitment to the continuation of life ‘as we know it’ “whatever it takes” (Mario Draghi), that, paradoxically, is now paving the way into a new, third phase of modernity, whose central characteristic is the growing obsolescence of post-Enlightenment idea(l)s of

12 After this chapter had already been completed (in 2024), several new developments took place. Whereas in Britain, too, the election victory of Keir Starmer’s Labour Party, which some commentators have already linked to Tony Blair’s and Gordon Brown’s New Labour (Clarke 2024; Rustin 2024), seems to point in a similar direction, by contrast, the reelection of Donald Trump in the US or the premature end of the German ‘traffic light coalition’ again appear to indicate a different trend. On the whole, the political situation is at present extremely volatile, making any predictions highly difficult – this, precisely, is the nature of the interregnum.

13 In all the following quotations from Blühdorn’s study, the translations are mine.

democracy, liberty, equality, human dignity and universal rights, rationality, autonomy, responsibility, and maturity (*Mündigkeit*). For Blühdorn, rather than a 'regression', 'decline', or 'end' of modernity, this development signals the dawning of a new type – a dialectical evolution, since it results from the consistent *realization* of modernity, not from its *suspension*. After all, key values such as emancipation, freedom, or self-realization remain absolutely central – what is changing is not the basic principles themselves, but their *meaning*. Thus, what we are arguably witnessing today is "the emancipation from the traditional idea of the autonomous subject *in the name of* freedom and self-determination" (248). As Blühdorn explains: "While the first and second modernity were a project of inclusion, equality, universal rights, self-determination and cosmopolitanism, the third modernity is dominated, in ideologically different variants, by an agenda of closure, control, inequality, polarization and exclusion." (247) And this agenda is pursued on behalf of the ideals of modernity themselves. Blühdorn too, adopting Karl Polanyi's term, discusses several 'great transformations' that are taking place today – the crisis of capitalism, the Anthropocene, the 'autocratic-authoritarian turn', digitalization and the rise of artificial intelligence, and the new geopolitical East-West-conflict (97–159). For him, what all these changes essentially point to is the more or less conscious abandonment of *the modern central norm of the autonomous subject*. This, then, is a truly epochal, quasi-ontological transformation: "It is correct to assume that the multiple crisis [*Vielfachkrise*] is a *systemic crisis*. However, contrary to popular belief, the crumbling system is not capitalism [...], but the value system of European-Western modernity." (161)

As I see it, the precise interrelations between conjuncture and epoch require further elaboration within Cultural Studies. Yet, I believe that these intersections, too, constitute crucial sites of struggle – and as the changing understanding of terms such as 'freedom' just mentioned makes clear, this also involves struggles over meaning (which have of course always played a central role in Cultural Studies). It seems to me that one potentially productive way for thinking about the contemporary transformations and struggles is through the notion of *relationality*. For at heart, what the 'return of the repressed' discussed above in most cases is about is a return of (the fact of) relationality – in the sense that 'our' way of life is inseparably connected with the conditions of existence of multiple 'others', human as well as nonhuman. And the conflicts over normality are fundamentally conflicts over the visibility and acknowledgement of this fact and its consequences. That is, they are conflicts over 'immunity' (cf. **ch. 4**). In other words: Whether it is the financial crisis, the urgencies associated with the notion of the Anthropocene, the so-called 'migration crisis', the recent debates about gender, or the Corona pandemic – what has become palpable in all of these cases is the essentially fictional and problematic nature of a formatting of reality that is based on dualisms and the idea of clearly separated, self-contained

entities.¹⁴ Instead of distinct and stable binary oppositions of inside and outside, the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ (Stuart Hall), self and other, subject and object, mind and body, man and woman, human and nonhuman, and so forth, what these and other recent developments have actually brought to light is the fundamental fact of ‘entanglement’. The basic unit of thought should be the relation, not the self-enclosed entity. Whether we are considering ‘social’ (economic, socio-cultural, political, etc.) or biological worlds, what we encounter everywhere are interrelations, webs, networks, assemblages rather than stable, pure, and independent existents. As I argue in the **coda**, this has almost always been the ‘ontological unconscious’ of ‘Western’ onto-epistemology, and of course it has time and again surfaced throughout history, especially in literature, film, and art. In recent years, it has much more explicitly and broadly become the subject of the sciences – natural (biology, ecology, physics, and more) and social (postcolonialism and decoloniality, critical race theory, Indigenous studies, feminist, gender, queer, and trans theory, disability/crip theory, environmental science, and more) – as well as of different forms of social activism – and it has always been a vital element in numerous ‘non-Western’ cosmologies (cf. Descola 2013). From all these different corners, the hegemony of the onto-epistemology of ‘Western’ modernity has now come under attack, its construction of the real – long able to pose as ‘Reality’ – exposed as just one possibility among many – and a ruinous one at that – and contested by a multiplicity of “subaltern realities” and “proposals for ‘worlding’ life on new premises” (Escobar 2020: 4).

By contrast, what I have described as the various attempts to defend normality are (also) fueled by a desire to ward off this “ontological insult” (Bratton 2021: 98) through a reassertion of immunitarian logics, that is to say, through a re(in)statement of identities and boundaries – holding off complicity and accountability (cf. **ch. 5**), holding off the ‘floods’ of migrants, holding off the ‘infiltration’ (including the corporeal one) by the Other, both human and nonhuman, etc. Consequently, borders, real and symbolic, rise up far and wide. Whether it is the climate, the state, the body, identities, or epistemic regimes with their categories and codes – just as the reality of interrelatedness, impurity, multiplicity, and processuality becomes obvious everywhere, as the “leakages multiply”, we witness a widespread tendency towards purity and rigidity, a desire to shore up, congeal, and “guard [the] dam against all that flows” (Daggett 2018: 43, 36; cf. also Shotwell 2016). Central to many of these maneuvers is the fortification of the ‘Western’ fantasy of the sovereign, monadic Self. As Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey (2025) have shown, many of the recent movements and measures to protect the status quo are based on a sense of ‘offended freedom’ (*gekränkte Freiheit*), in other words, on a radically libertarian under-

14 With regard to the pandemic, cf. on this issue especially Bratton 2021; Di Cesare 2021; Latour 2021; Preciado 2020; and Sloterdijk 2021. On immunity more generally, cf. the work of Roberto Esposito.

standing of the subject and its freedom, which ignores, denies, and resists all forms of (inter-)dependency and which hence sees any restriction on individual behavior as an unbearable imposition. What the two scholars call ‘libertarian authoritarianism’ is thus a “demonstrative gesture of dissociation” (Amlinger/Nachtwey 2025: 11; *eine demonstrative Geste der Beziehungslosigkeit* [Amlinger/Nachtwey 2022: 21]). For a paradigmatic example, think of the refusal to wear a safety mask during the pandemic on behalf of personal choice and autonomy (cf. Bennett 2021). Here, we once again encounter what Blühdorn describes as an emancipation from Enlightenment modernity *in the name* of its central norms – autonomy, self-determination, self-realization. ‘Freedom’ here primarily comes to mean an individual freedom, a personal (phantom) possession (cf. von Redecker 2020) – not a relation with the world, but with oneself.

Without doubt, such issues must form part of the contemporary struggles. I have argued that the present can productively be read as an interregnum, that is, as an essentially transitional moment marked by multiple shifts and changes. As we have seen, this pertains to both, the level of the conjuncture as well as the level of the epoch – the power of political regimes such as those of Merkel or Scholz, at core dedicated to “keeping the world out of the people’s hair” (Dausend et al. 2024, my trans.), is waning, and this is intimately bound up with several epochal transformations, many of which signal an erosion of the ethico-onto-epistemology of ‘Western’ modernity. From the perspective of a Cultural Studies that continues to conceive of itself as a ‘political project’ (Stuart Hall) and that hence remains committed to the fight for justice, liberty, and equality, this is not something to be lamented. After all, it was precisely the hitherto dominant epochal constellations that led into the contemporary urgencies in the first place and the conjunctural ones that determinedly deepened them. The question is what comes next. Even though Blühdorn’s sobering argument suggests that the emancipatory hopes of old have outlived their time, I would insist once more that the outcome of the processes currently unfolding is still an open one. An alternative to Blühdorn’s ‘third modernity’ is yet a possibility. For this, however, both ‘normality’ and the immunitarian paradigm will have to be overcome – and there are signs of this, too, after all, many of them, both within but also especially outside of the ‘West’. Perhaps we (who?) can yet come to terms with the reality of interrelationality, of the vulnerability and dependency of all, which the pandemic has once again brought home to us in such a powerful way, come to terms, in other words, with the fundamental entanglement of the world, and fashion a new political ethos, an ‘ethos of cohabitation’, as Sabine Hark (2021), building particularly on the work of Judith Butler, has outlined it, that is, create power-sensitive, democratic, egalitarian, and ‘horizontal’ ways of being, built on practices of ‘promiscuous’ or ‘universal’ solidarity and care (Care Collective 2020).

Pin 7: Virus / Biopolitics

The preceding pins have to some extent reproduced the typical procedure of conjunctural analysis (cf. Kramer 2018): from the concrete – the ‘cultural object’ of the mask, the ‘theme’ of the anti-Corona protests as moral panic – to the abstract – the conjuncture and even the epoch as interregnum. They have shown how disputes over mask mandates or demonstrations against lockdown are intimately entangled with transformations and conflicts that are of a much more ‘systemic’ nature (economic, political and geo-political, socio-cultural, technological, etc.), and, indeed, with struggles over the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (or ‘existable’) (Rancière 1999), over the reigning ethico-onto-epistemology itself, and hence over the very ‘make-up’ – its ‘worlding’ – of the world we live in (cf. **postscript**). The pins were driven by the central question of conjunctural analysis: ‘What does this have to do with everything else?’ In doing so, they have pointed to a variety of different dimensions and tried to give an indication of the complexity of the present moment. Needless to say, these rough brushstrokes do not do justice to the demands for detail, differentiation, and specificity of the method. Rather than a conjunctural analysis proper, I prefer to see them as ‘intimations’ of one, as a set of preliminary methodological and analytical reflections that will hopefully prove useful to future investigations. As a final step, let me now reverse the direction of travel in our cyclone, slide down a different arm of our tentacular analytic assemblage, and move back again from the ‘very big’ to the ‘very small’ – and once again illustrate the essential interconnectedness of all these different ‘levels’.

For pragmatic reasons – to somewhat reduce complexity – the discussion in pins 5 and 6 has admittedly remained rather anthropocentric. Yet, it is clear that for a posthumanist Cultural Studies, the non- and more-than-human must consistently be a key part of any investigation. Naturally, in the case of the Corona pandemic, this has to include *the virus*. And here, once again, I believe that the posthumanization of our field provides us with helpful tools that allow for better analyses. Unsurprisingly, for many commentators, the Foucauldian concept of ‘biopolitics’ offered a very productive approach for thinking about the pandemic, perhaps most prominently Giorgio Agamben (2021). Though Agamben’s interventions are not without merit, from the perspective of conjunctural analysis, there is much about his large-scale, sweeping declarations about the ‘state of exception’, ‘bare life’, ‘sanitation terror’, and the ‘religion of health’ that should be viewed skeptically and critically. Such a necessary critique has already been developed by others. Here, I want to confine myself to a few remarks regarding the analytic of biopolitics itself. Once this notion is ‘diffracted’ through thinking associated with the nonhuman turn, several important reformulations ensue. What emerges is a ‘*more-than-human (techno-)biopolitics*’, which not only extends the ‘bios’, and with it the issue of the political management and regulation of life, from humans to animals, plants, and other living beings, and

which is more attentive to the unparalleled transformative power of contemporary technoscience, now intervening on a multiplicity of levels, including the molecular and genetic, but which also rethinks the very object and the medium of biopolitics (Lemke 2021: 140).¹⁵

Here, a central concept is the Foucauldian notion of the ‘milieu’, which Thomas Lemke, in his illuminating ‘posthumanist’ rereading of Foucault, has recently unearthed and brought into dialogue with the new materialism (as well as science and technology studies) (Lemke 2021: 121–40). The milieu, a vital element of liberal governmentality as Foucault understands it, is what is at stake in the central governmental endeavor to control *circulation*, that is, to organize the mobilities of human as well as nonhuman entities. For Foucault, “the milieu is more than an ‘environment’, a ‘background’ or a ‘surrounding’ in which individuals and populations live and evolve; it is an interactive space, a relational network that constitutes the elements of which it consists as much as it is itself their endpoint or outcome.” (130) As Lemke explains, “the concept of the milieu attends to the multiple, complex, recursive, and always mobile relations between interdependent elements and entities of all kinds mobilized in ‘circulations’” (131). The milieu is material-semiotic, natural-cultural – “a spatial-temporal arrangement of a hybrid ensemble of [...] entities mobilized to control future trajectories and to achieve specific goals” (131). As such, it is a crucial field of intervention for power. Now, the key biopolitical implication of this concept (cf. 135–40) is that it compels us to think biopower not so much in terms of the management of individual (human) bodies and populations (only), but of *the regulation of sets of relations and processes* – or, more precisely, to rethink the former in terms of the latter. Importantly, this also means that “human nature is not an invariant anthropological universal but is differently articulated within practices – practices that are conceived of as more-than-human processes” – and that “neither nature nor life is a self-evident or stable entity or property” (137). The concept of the milieu thus “not only disrupts conventional ideas of exteriority and externality but also urges humans to recognize alterity in their own humanness” (137). Recalibrated along such lines, the analytic of biopolitics demands not just an investigation of the multiple forms of control through which life – human as well as nonhuman – is ‘made to live’, but also of the political stakes involved in the drawing of the ‘agential cuts’ (Barad 2007) through which ‘life’ is constructed in the first place. This move, then, also connects biopower to ‘geontopower’, the governance of life and death to the governance of the very distinction between life and nonlife (Povinelli 2016).

I believe that such a reformulated notion of biopolitics could prove very productive in the context of a conjunctural analysis of the Corona pandemic. While conjunc-

15 On more-than-human biopolitics, cf. also the important work of posthumanistically oriented scholars such as Donna Haraway (esp. 2005), Jeffrey T. Nealon (2015), or Cary Wolfe (esp. 2013).

tural analysis has traditionally tended to ignore the nonhuman, this perspective now puts the virus itself center stage. Interestingly, it is especially with regard to the virus that received understandings of life and of the organism have come under attack within biology itself. In particular, philosophers of biology have begun developing a “bottom-up perspective, starting at the microscopic level of biology, rather than top-down from its most complex and undisputed exemplars”, and, from such an alternative vantage point, have suggested that “much standard thinking is based on quite restricted and even covertly normative conceptions of what life is” and hence gone on to “challenge the view that entities such as viruses are not alive and that the minimal definition of life must be cellular” (O'Malley 2012: 209). Scholars have challenged the “inflexible dichotomy of life and non-life” and replaced it with a “continuum view of life” (O'Malley 2012: 228, 225). Intimately connected with this is the rejection of the basic supposition that life is composed of discrete, stable, and genetically homogeneous organisms that possess more or less clear boundaries and that it is essentially driven by ‘selfishness’ (Richard Dawkins) and competition. Of course, this assumption “accords well with the orthodox metaphysical thesis that the world is composed of things, or substances” (Dupré/Guttinger 2016: 109), with the attendant essentialism and individualism, and not least, it needs to be said, with the ideology of capitalism. By contrast, not least through newer research regarding symbiosis – now seen as virtually omnipresent – and related subjects like holobionts or microbiomes, biological entities have increasingly come to be conceived as “series of dynamic and diverse collaborations”, whose “boundaries are flexible and unfixed” (O'Malley 2012: 225). As in the humanities and social sciences, and, indeed, partly in conversation with them (cf. also Haraway 2016), a different, namely *relational* and *processual* onto-epistemology has emerged – ‘everything flows’ (Nicholson/Dupré 2018; cf. also, e.g., Dupré 2012, 2020).

Viruses in particular straddle and unsettle the borderline between the living and the nonliving¹⁶ (cf., e.g., Dupré/Guttinger 2016; Pradeu/Kostyrka/Dupré 2016) and, in contrast to the conventional view of them as “distinct individuals that are entirely competitive among themselves, and entirely harmful to anything else unlucky enough to be affected by them” (Dupré/Guttinger 2016: 110), are now instead frequently seen as processes rather than things and as partly beneficial, or ‘mutualistic’ (Pradeu 2016). More than that, rather than exclusively parasitic and self-serving, viruses, like bacteria, are actually recognized as integral, possibly even vital, parts of biological systems and organisms – including the human body, in which, it is estimated, “there are about ten times as many virus particles as cells” (Dupré/Guttinger 2016: 110). Thomas Pradeu summarizes this recent rethinking of viruses and of biological entities more generally:

16 In other regards too, viruses are veritable onto-epistemic troublemakers – ‘Coviderrida’ indeed (Al-Khafaji 2022).

Viruses are everywhere in, on, and around living things, from prokaryotes to plants, fungi, and animals; they are sometimes detrimental, and at other times useful or even indispensable. By their ubiquity and diverse functional roles in every possible host, viruses extend the view that biological individuals are not autonomous but, on the contrary, heterogeneous (i.e., made of entities of different origins, often belonging to different kingdoms) and heteronomous (i.e., dependent, to some degree, on other biological entities to complete their life cycle). Moreover, ecological and evolutionary competition needs to be reconceptualized, both spatially and temporally. Competition occurs not between selfish, autonomous, and homogeneous entities, but between temporarily constituted associations or aggregates (some of them long-lasting, others transient). (2016: 86)

In our terminology, what we are thus essentially concerned with every time are *assemblages*. And all of this, importantly, means that conventional notions of health, immunity, and infection need to be rethought as well:

one should reject the dominant view according to which the normal healthy situation for a given organism, and in particular for a human being, would be the *absence of infection*. All living things harbor numerous viruses as part of their normal constitution and functioning. A healthy human is infected by more than ten permanent chronic systemic viruses (including herpesviruses, polyomaviruses, anelloviruses, adenoviruses, papillomaviruses), and this number may in fact be far higher [...]. The immune system cannot be defined anymore as a self-non-self discrimination system, given the huge number of commensal bacteria and viruses that live in a human being [...], and the fact that these genetically foreign components are not rejected, but rather immunologically regulated [...]. (Pradeu 2016: 84)

I believe that such an assemblageistic or “‘ecological’ view of the immune system” (Pradeu 2016: 85) invites yet another recalibration of the analytic of biopolitics, this time in the direction of more “microbial equality” (O’Malley/Dupré 2007: 155) – ‘size doesn’t matter’ (O’Malley/Dupré 2007). Neglect of microbes has arguably not only distorted “our philosophical view of the biological world” (O’Malley/Dupré 2007: 156), as well as “our anthropological view of the social world” (Paxson 2008: 19), but also our biopolitical view of the natural-cultural world. If microorganisms are an inescapable part of nature-cultures, then how ‘we’ live with and through them is a political question. There is a new type of ‘micropower’ to consider. Biopolitics needs to be extended into ‘*microbiopolitics*’. The management and regulation of life takes place on the microbiological level as well. As Heather Paxson, building on the work of Foucault and Latour, defines it, microbiopolitics involves “the creation of categories of microscopic biological agents; the anthropocentric evaluation of such agents; and

the elaboration of appropriate human behaviors vis-à-vis microorganisms engaged in infection, inoculation, and digestion” (2008: 17). Centrally, then, what is at stake are questions of ‘*biosecurity*’, of the narratives, technologies, and practices involved in the management of disease threats. As Paxson points out, ‘Western’ modernity has generally been characterized by a “hyper-hygienic Pasteurian social order” that is profoundly antiseptic, “bent on suppressing germs to promote human health writ large as ‘public health’” (2014: 116). It is driven by a ‘will to purity’ (Kroker/Kroker 1993) and a ‘will to closure’ (Wendy Brown qtd. in Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 533), operating through the geo(micro)biopolitical constitution of a seemingly clearly delineated healthy and clean inside opposed to a diseased and impure outside. Here, in other words, we once again encounter the immunitarian impulse already discussed above (cf. **ch. 4**). Yet, as we have seen, this notion of immunity is not only entirely illusory – it is also dangerous insofar as it is frequently precisely the very (ultimately always futile) attempt to wall in ‘good’ and wall out ‘risky’ life that itself leads to multiple health problems (e.g., destructive autoimmunity) (Hinchliffe et al. 2013). By contrast, if, following our relational and processual model, life is inevitably ‘impure’ and ‘pathological’, disease “becomes less about contamination and contagion, and more concerned with its systemic and endemic *co-generation*” (Hinchliffe et al. 2013: 537). To pick up the argument developed in pin 2, it is a question not of fortifying rigid *borderlines* (a Euclidean and geometrical understanding of space) but of managing entangled and mutable *borderlands* (a topological spatial imagination), constituted through the inter- and intra-relations of a multiplicity of actants (Hinchliffe et al. 2013). In other words, it is a question of governing the *milieu*.

An affirmative, posthumanist biopolitics would thus take ‘becoming-with’, that is, the inescapably interdependent and hybrid nature of all being, as its starting point – and hence also the state of a shared *vulnerability*, as “the very condition of possibility for every life form” (Shildrick 2022: 67) and, indeed, for all existents.¹⁷ It would proceed from the recognition that the true enemy in the pandemic was not the virus, but the currently dominant mode of governing the milieu – a mode largely operating in the service of the interests of capital. Altering this mode would involve a new, posthuman solidarity and thus a new, ‘post-Pasteurian’ (not anti-Pasteurian!) social order (Paxson 2008, 2014). The whole problematic of immunity/community as it emerges from the work of Roberto Esposito would be rethought in a resolutely

17 Yet, this quasi-ontological fact should of course not make us forget that vulnerability is *lived* in radically different ways insofar as beings are differentially exposed to risk and harm (Lorenzini 2021). Vulnerability should thus always be discussed in the plural, as *vulnerabilities*, which are socially generated, the result of processes of ‘vulnerabilization’: “it is produced through determinate actions, policies and structures that render particular bodies vulnerable in precise ways in specific, determinate situations” (Lloyd 2023: 11). In this context, cf. also Christine Daigle’s (2024) notion of ‘vulner-ability’ (which is inspired by Haraway’s ‘response-ability’).

postanthropocentric way (cf. **ch. 4**) and hence, (micro-)biopolitics would no longer only be about care of the human, whose health must be defended against all outside intruders, but about care of the entire 'mesh', the whole ecological web of life and nonlife, and therefore also about care of animals, plants, the land, infrastructures, and, yes, viruses and other microbes. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, several thinkers have expressed their hope for such a "biopolitics of entanglement" (Shildrick 2022: 68; cf. also, e.g., Bratton 2021; Daigle 2021; Di Cesare 2021; Latour 2021). Such hopes are not unfounded. Yet, all theoretico-philosophical desires for a "making wild of the master discourses" (Shildrick 2022: 68), an embrace of microorganisms as "potential friends and allies" (Paxson 2014: 116), an "opening to new forms of vitality" (Shildrick 2022: 68), and for the promises of a great 'metamorphosis' (Latour 2021) notwithstanding, Cultural Studies would always insist that it is *on the dirty and messy political ground of the conjuncture* that the fate of such dreams will be decided.

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