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Lethal Theory Redux: Vulgar Wirthism, Spiteful Anti-Urbanism, and the (Necro)Politics of Covid-19 in the United States

Abstract: What is the role of urban theory in the spread of Covid-19, and the politics around it, in the United States? This essay outlines the part in this played by "Vulgar Wirthism," the notion that the country is divided into "urban" and "rural" places based on relative levels of density, population, and heterogeneity. Vulgar Wirthism has formed the conceptual basis for the idea that urban places are especially susceptible to spread of the virus, and rural places protected from it, an idea that has influenced pandemic policy and politics in dangerous and even lethal ways. In particular, I argue that Vulgar Wirthism has underwritten the emergence of a spiteful anti-urbanism, a form of necropolitics embracing the sacrifice of one's own political allies in exchange for damaging one's political enemies. I conclude by arguing that in the context of pandemic, theories of "planetary urbanization," despite their limitations and blind spots, facilitate a less dangerous form of socio-spatial imaginary.

Reporter: But the reason they don't have a problem now is because of social distancing. So if you ease the guidelines…

Donald Trump: No, the reason they don't have … is partially, and some of that will stay in effect. Much of it will stay at effect for a period of time, but the reason also is the different kinds of states. They have lots of room, they have fewer people and they have lots of room.

-Exchange at White House Press Conference, April 14, 2020[1]

As I begin writing this on the afternoon of April 3, many of the places hardest hit by Covid-19 in the United States were large cities: Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Detroit, Miami, New Orleans, New York.[2] The country's most populous city, New York, was the largest of these epicenters: as of April 3, the city and its suburbs had over 100,000 cases, representing more than a third of the country's entire caseload[3] Media reports documenting the New York's worsening situation often focused on the role played by its socio-spatial environment. The city's uniquely

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[1] https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-coronavirus-press-briefing-transcript-april-14-trump-halts-who-funding

[2] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/04/01/why-it-will-be-difficult-to-restart-the-economy-after-covid-19/

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html

crowded conditions — its density — served as an accelerant for the coronavirus' spread as it invisibly whipped through the city's subways, sidewalks, bodegas, clubs, restaurants, jails, and hospitals. The city was also uniquely vulnerable as a center of global mobility, commerce, and culture. As people of many different backgrounds moved in, out, and through the city, their innumerable and diverse exchanges generated not just the heterogeneity — economic, cultural, social — with which New York is so closely identified, but innumerable and diverse opportunities for the diffusion of the virus.

Vulgar Wirthism and Covid-19

A careful reader may have detected a subtext here: Louis Wirth's (1938) famous articulation of population, density, and heterogeneity as the key criteria of an urban, as opposed to a rural, place. Indeed, interpretations of and reactions to the early stage of the pandemic in the US was structured by a kind of vulgar Wirthism, the idea that the United States is spatially constituted by bounded places defined in relation to the two poles of the rural-urban continuum (cities, countryside, and lying in between, suburbs), and that these different sorts of places are characterized by specific bundles of social relations.[4] This vulgar Wirthism has a long pedigree in the US, but has become widespread among intellectuals and lay people alike since the 1970s, when the post-civil rights realignment of political duopoly, along with political-economic reconstruction, led a profound reformulation of socio-spatial order of the United States. The details of this socio-spatial imaginary scarcely need to be articulated, they are so taken-for-granted at this point: tolerance and diversity vs. homogeneity and whiteness; cosmopolitanism/"globalism" vs. xenophobia/nationalism; secularism vs. religiosity; seaboards

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[4] I call this *vulgar* Wirthism because Wirth's theory of urbanism, along with the work of many of his fellow members of the Chicago School in fact display a good deal more spatial and social sophistication than does the version of Wirthism described here.

full of "coastal elites" vs. "flyover country" full of "real Americans;" "blue" vs. "red"; Starbucks and Wholefoods vs. Wal-Mart and Waffle House; Subarus and Teslas vs. pick-up trucks; and on and on. Indeed, I would argue that this vulgar Wirthism has become something of an ur-theory of contemporary American life, encompassing class, race, gender, sexuality, political ideology, consumption, aesthetics, religion, and more under a single, expansive rubric, constructing a dualism that operates at multiple scales through processes of conceptual synecdoche and fractalization: Staten Island vs. Manhattan; New York City vs. upstate; New York and other "blue" states vs. Alabama and other "red" states; Blue America vs. Red America.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this vulgar Wirthism has been, to use Eyal Weizman's evocative phrase, a *lethal* theory (2006).[5] It drove a number of reactions and decisions that have already resulted in unnecessary death, and will continue to do so. For instance, governors seeking to justify their refusal to lock down their states, mobilized the ostensibly urban susceptibility (and rural resistance) to the disease. "South Dakota is not New York City," said that state's governor, Kristi Noem, on April 1.[6] Alabama Governor Kay Ivy defended her refusal to issue a shelter-in-place order in her state by saying, "we are not California, we're not New York, we aren't even Louisiana" (though at the time, though the absolute numbers were vastly different, Alabama actually had a *higher* rate of increase than California).[7] On April 3, she relented; in the interim the number of deaths in Alabama increased

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[5] As a caveat, I want to note that the lethality of this theory is not new. It is implicated in many of the American catastrophes of the last several decades, from the opioid epidemic to the racist workings of the criminal justice system to the spatial and social inequality driven by several decades of neoliberalizing economic development. As the work of Paul Farmer, Shirley Lindenbaum, and so many other anthropologists indicates, epidemics expose, express, work through, and intensify extant social, political and cultural processes and developments; Covid-19 is no different.

[6] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/stay-at-home-orders-states/. Later, a pork processing plant in South Dakota became one of the nation's hottest hotspots, with over 500 cases associated with it.

[7] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/27/alabama-governor-wont-order-shelter-in-place-because-we-are-not-california-by-population-its-worse/

tenfold, from three to over thirty; as epidemiologists, public health experts, and other experts have noted, at this stage of a pandemic, delays of even days can have huge ramifications in terms of lives interrupted and lost.[8] In late March other governors — Republican Ron DeSantis of Florida and Democrat Gina Raimondo of Rhode Island — targeted New Yorkers for interdiction, ignoring the porousness of state borders, not to mention the already-well-rooted community spread within their states.

President Trump, again in late March, and in defiance of the facts on the ground, spoke often of how certain states, (most prominently New York) were doing badly and other conspicuously rural places — Idaho (itself home of a major hot spot), Iowa, Nebraska — were "handling it very, very well and…are not affected to the same extent, or, frankly, not even nearly to the extent of New York.[9] Trump also briefly floated the idea of a metropolitan area quarantine that would cover New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Though the idea was quickly dropped, it did sketch the outlines of how anti-New York and anti-urban rhetoric, dependent on a virulent version of vulgar Wirthism that emphasized the essential foreignness of urban centers, might become central to the political dynamics of the crisis. "DeSantis now seeks to shift blame for his failure to take the most basic preventative actions onto fleeing New Yorkers," blogger Joshua Micah Marshall wrote, "you can see at a distance the evolving political narrative. The sorrows that befall Florida and soon other red states will be blamed on the symbolic capital of deracinated liberalism, New York City, with its immigrants, bad values and dirty ways."[10]

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[8] For a widely circulated analysis, see https://medium.com/@tomaspueyo/coronavirus-act-today-or-people-will-die-f4d3d9cd99ca. And it was not just governors who erred here: Mayor Bill De Blasio's reluctance to shut down New York City, its schools in particular, has no doubt worsened the pandemic's impact, though this decision was driven by a different political calculus than Ivey's.

[9] https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-9/

[10] https://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblog/ron-desantis-previews-the-trumpist-line-on-whos-to-blame-for-covid-19; for a key discussion of New York City as a focus of anti-urbanism and the conceptual divides that underwrite it, see Bender 2002.

But it was not just politicians whose actions were inflected by vulgar Wirthism. The wealthy fled to country and vacation homes searching out safe havens, even as resort spots like Sun Valley, Idaho and the Hamptons became nodes in Covid-19's spread (both Blaine County, Idaho and Suffolk County, NY had per-capita higher infection rates than New York City on April 6); the influx of people into these areas also threatened to overwhelm their thin health care resources.[11] Airbnb, Craigslist and other short-term rental services began to feature ads for residences located in exurban and rural locations, selling such "coronavirus-free" locations as offering spatial protection against infection.[12] And in many parts of the country, especially in Southern states where governors had been most likely to dismiss the need for social distancing measures, people continued to go about their daily lives in more-or-less normal fashion—with ramifications that only began to emerge weeks later.[13] The example of this with the most tragic outcome was the case of Albany, Georgia, where dozens of people died and many more were infected after an extended funeral in early March; as a report by Charles Bethea made clear, this was facilitated by a sense, no doubt reinforced by Governor Brian Kemp's reluctance to act, that the virus would not be a problem in small-town Georgia, as well as racialized and classed health disparities.[14]

These kinds of reactions on the part of everyday people were understandable; vulgar Wirthism supplied a taken-for-granted spatio-social conceptualization into which the visible geography of the early stages of pandemic nestled. The magnitude of the numbers in New York made population a kind of distorted magnifying glass: along with the widely disseminated maps

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[11] https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/29/coronavirus-heres-a-map-of-rural-counties-in-us-most-affected-by-pandemic.html
[12] https://www.citylab.com/life/2020/03/coronavirus-data-cities-rural-areas-pandemic-health-risks/607783/
[13] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-social-distancing.html
[14] https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-the-coronavirus-is-doing-to-rural-georgia

of the outbreak, with large colored circles centered on large cities, the large numbers drew

attention to the virus's presence in the city even as other places were experiencing similar rates

of increase in caseload.[15]

Less forgivable were the distortions and falsehoods put forward by political leaders and

pundits, particularly (but not only, as the case of Raimondo shows) on the right.[16] The illusion

that this was an disease of the city — one driven by density, population, and heterogeneity —

allowed for the mobilization of well-worn anti-urban tropes, even as doing so placed those living

and seeking safety outside of urban centers directly in harm's way. While the lack of action on

the part of the Trump administration threatened New York City — the echoes of the 1970s fiscal-

crisis-era invitation to the city to "drop dead" were clear[17] — the willingness of political leaders

to sacrifice the lives *of their own supporters* on the altar of anti-urbanism was remarkable, and

alarming. It did not go unnoticed. One blogger coined the evocative phrase "rural roulette" to

describe the way in which "a focus on the cities will mitigate the biggest risks, even though the

rural areas would be easily overwhelmed even with a smaller number of infections." Another

commenter quoted an "administration insider" as saying Trump was "killing his own supporters"

a sentiment echoed by another blog post entitled "Trump and Southern Governors Team Up to

Kill Republican Voters." Two liberal commentators asked on a podcast, "Is The Trump Cult a

Death Cult?"[18] This willingness to expose oneself or one's in-group to disease and death in the

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[15] In a review of Merry 2016, Ballesteros (2019) notes that "indicators based on counts are different from those that are based on ratios…Differently calculated indicators embody different social and conceptual relations; they reflect different assumptions about causality, and, ultimately, as Merry powerfully articulates, they reflect different social theories about how the world works."

[16] See https://nomoremister.blogspot.com/2020/03/i-told-you-right-was-going-to-start.html for a cataloging of Fox News personality and Trump whisperer Tucker Carlson's efforts to lay responsibility for the growing pandemic at the feet of politically correct New York City.

[17] See https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/opinion/trump-nyc-coronavirus.html and https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/opinion/nyc-coronavirus.html

[18] See, respectively, https://www.emptywheel.net/2020/03/26/trumps-blame-the-governors-strategy-and-rural-roulette/; https://www.emptywheel.net/2020/04/02/trump-and-southern-governors-team-up-to-kill-republican-voters/; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/05/trump-is-killing-his-own-supporters-coronavirus-

pursuit of one's commitments to politics and identity is an important consideration in and of itself, as Jonathan Metzl's *Dying of Whiteness* demonstrates (2020). But its role in the early stages of the Covid-19 was notable for its intensity and virulence, and demands some attention.

Spite, Anti-Urbanism, and Necropolitics

The evolutionary theorist W.D. Hamilton has defined "spite" as "a behavior which is costly to both the actor and the recipient" (1970). This pithy definition is useful as a starting point for thinking though spite as the affective cornerstone of a particular form of "angry politics" in the context of pandemic (Maskovsky and Bjork-James 2020): a politics in which the urge to damage others outweighs that of self-preservation. This politics represents an intensification of and imbrication of two tendencies in right-wing politics. The first, as documented by Sophie Bjork-James is the celebration of violence and death that courses through right-wing American narratives and discourse; however, here the demand is typically for the sacrifice of others' lives, rather than those of their generally white, evangelical, and male protagonists (2020). The second is the pre-pandemic political form of "trolling the libs," so important to the Trumpist version of conservatism political subjectivity (think "rolling coal" and "Trump 2020: Fuck Your Feelings" t-shirts). While typically discussed in terms of Trump's "excoriation of political correctness" and the mobilization of conservative outrage against "liberal elites" (Maskovsky 2020), there is also a taunting and even comedic element to this (Hall et al. 2016). The point is not necessarily to provoke outrage on the part of potential political allies on the right, but rather to provoke outrage among one's political enemies through speech and action that tweak of liberal pieties.

In normal times, these two tendencies, while typically running parallel, have at times overlapped, particularly in the articulation of "eliminationist" fantasies of gun-violence against

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covid-19; https://theintercept.com/2020/03/25/is-the-trump-cult-a-death-cult/

liberals and/or other, often radicalized, political enemies (Neiwert 2009), "liberal hunting permit" bumper stickers being a prime example. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, public health efforts to stem the pandemic were the liberal pieties subject now subject from derision everywhere from Facebook to Fox News to the White House, as well, crucially. as a refusal to act on the part conservative politicians mentioned above. For in this way "trolling the libs" is transformed into something potentially not only destructive of others, but destructive of the self, as well of members of the self's political community. Trump's insistence, through rhetoric and (in)action, on minimizing the pandemic emblematizes this (as does Republican governors in states like Arkansas and Florida), as it seems to come at any cost, even that of the lives of his treasured base. Who knew that the victim(s) of Trump's infamous hypothetical shooting in the middle of Fifth Avenue would be the very supporters in whose dedication he exulted?

We see here the emergence of a political dynamic that assembles extant cultural and governmental currents in a disturbing new way. It calls to mind Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism," as the rightist's attachment to punishment of the other persists "even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (2006:21). This optimism is not just cruel, but potentially deadly, as indicated by media reports of conservatives' deploying a refusal to social distance as a political act, expressing their opposition and resistance to an alarmist media and overweening liberal elites.[19] Moreover, when this urge is translated into policy it becomes a form of governmental rationality, a nascent from of necropolitics in which a certain number of residents of the primarily conservative states whose governors (and whose

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[19] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/03/social-distancing-culture/609019/

much-favored president) through their refusal to impose stay-at-home orders essentially condemn a statistically predictable number of their citizens, a good chunk of whom can be assumed be their supporters, to disease, and therefore (for a smaller number) death. They become, to use Mbembe's terms, "living dead" (2003:40). In particular, this politics echoes his discussion of the suicide bomber — "in this instance, my death goes hand in hand with the death of the Other" (Ibid.:36) — though it operates in a less proximal and personal, and more attenuated, mediated, and bureaucratized manner.

Crucially, the mobilization of vulgar Wirthism provides the theoretical ground in which this can all take root. The "necropoliticization" of spiteful anti-urbanism, the passage of optimism from cruel to deadly is inconceivable without the bipolar continuum of urban and rural that is vulgar Wirthism's central conceptual offering. The Trumpist rights' go-to solution for everything — interdiction by means physical and/or legal — only works in the presence of an imagined geography in which there are already boundaries and borders to be hardened, whether internal to the US or separating it from its North American neighbors. The ostensible divide between urban and rural, and the conceptual rubric it provides for so many other divisions, oppositions, and tensions within the contemporary United States, has made possible the contemporary disaster possible, and perhaps, once the coronavirus arrived, inevitable.

Beyond Vulgar Wirthism: Planetary Urbanization and its Limits

So what is to be done? At risk of committing an urban theorist's version of the hammer/nail problem, let me suggest the need to think differently about space, society, urbanism, and urbanization. Anthropological reflection has made it clear that theory can play an important (though probably not determinative) role in forms of violence and death both spectacular and routine (see among so many others Asad 1973). Besides, the obvious example of Weizman's

piece, the lethality of theory has been less considered in urban theory.[20] It is unfair to lay this horrifying situation here at Wirth's doorstep: all sorts of theory — critical, leftist and otherwise — can be used to project power even if it is intended to subvert it (Weizman 2006:69). As a leftist himself, Wirth is no doubt rolling his grave at the suggestion his theory might have played a role in our ongoing COVID-19 catastrophe. But as a member of the Chicago School, which despite all its limitations, did desire that theory be a force for more just and dignified urban forms of life, I imagine he would like us to think carefully about how our intellectual apparatuses might be complicit (or not) in a moment in which politics, urban theory, and pandemic have joined together to wreak havoc in a particular way. Thus, the need for urban theories allow us to think the social-spatial constitution of the United States in a manner that might counter conceptual vulgar Wirthism.

One obvious example is the work in urban studies on what is called "planetary urbanization." Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (Brenner and Schmid 2011), for instance, have argued that the conceptual dualism between city and countryside, if it ever was tenable, certainly is no longer. "The bulk of twentieth century urban studies," they write, "rested on the assumption that cities — or, later, 'conurbations,' 'city-regions,' 'urban regions,' 'metropolitan regions,' and 'global city-regions' — represented a particular type of territory that was qualitatively specific and thus different from the putatively 'non-urban' spaces that lay beyond their boundaries" (Ibid.:11). Several processes—the creation of new scales of urbanization, the re-territorialization of urban functions of various kinds, and what they dub "the disintegration of the hinterland" and the "end of the wilderness"—mean that there is no longer, as they put it, "a relatively stable putatively 'non-urban realm' [serving] as a 'constitutive outside' for [urban studies']

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[20] Other examples might include work on the role of "broken windows" theory in animating the violence of mass incarceration and the often deadly policing techniques that have accompanied it (see (Vitale 2008)).

epistemological and empirical operations" (Ibid.). This situation calls for new theoretical categories, new methodological approaches, new sites of research, and new forms of comparative thinking (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015; Wilson and Jonas 2018; Brenner 2013).

This perspective allows us to better gauge the spatial configurations of pandemic. While density may accelerate the spread in certain locales, perhaps more important to think about are the various ways in which the virus circulates across space, ways that typically follow the grooves created by the new dynamics of urbanization: links between "wilderness" vacation homes and urban centers, new distribution networks and supply chains, new patterns of human mobility driven by new forms of work and leisure. Amazon warehouses from Staten Island to Oklahoma City, cruise ships docking in Florida, airliners traveling from China to Texas, a UPS shipping hub in Kentucky, meatpacking plants in South Dakota and elsewhere, and travelers from suburban Atlanta to small-town Georgia and back again: these are the sites and channels of viral circulation, not just cities. Understanding this allows the crucial insight that a "non-urban" location does not provide protection from COVID-19, because there are no (or at least, very few) places remaining that are not connected to the networks and flows of goods and people that constitute our urbanized planet in multiple and complex ways. As urbanist Roger Keil has put it, "the idea that we can go to countryside to protect ourselves is a bit of a myth, because it doesn't exist like it used to."[21]

This is not to say that this school of thought does not have its own problems. Cindi Katz has laid out a trenchant critique of its neglect of feminist, queer, critical-race, and postcolonial perspectives, as well as of agency, lived experience, and subjectivity(Forthcoming).[22] A move towards planetary urbanization does not evacuate the idea of "urbanism as a way of life," as

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[21] https://www.citylab.com/life/2020/03/coronavirus-data-cities-rural-areas-pandemic-health-risks/607783/
[22] For other important critiques of this work see Krause 2013; Blanchette and LaFlamme 2019; Derickson 2015.

Wirth put it: instead, it requires us to see how this way of life — or rather how various urban ways of living, acting, thinking, feeling, and behaving — intersect with the dynamics of urbanization to create novel forms of collectivity, agency, ideology, politics, resistance, understanding, and so on (Maskovsky and Brash 2019). Indeed, our current situation shows the power of urbanism as a conceptual apparatus, and the lethal consequences that emerge when Wirthism, which both describes and informs urbanism as a way of life, collides with the reality of a virus that rides the wave of planetary urbanization across oceans, nations, metropolitan areas, and regional divides.

Lastly, planetary urbanization, has its own dangerous vulgate. The nostrums that "the virus doesn't discriminate" and "we all are connected" may be true to a certain degree (and perhaps provisionally necessary to spur an adequate response in a society of such deep inequality), but they ignore the ways in which its impacts, lethal or not, are distributed unevenly. As has been evident from the beginning of the pandemic, class, race, ethnicity, gender, ableism and other forms of social inequality structure people's ability to act to slow the disease; to avoid illness and death; and to weather the economic disaster that is following on its heels. Health disparities and labor-market stratification rooted in ongoing processes of white supremacy and xenophobia have led to African-Americans and Hispanics experiencing disproportionate levels of infection and death; first indicators showed that Covid-19's fatality rate for these groups was twice as high as for non-Hispanic whites.[23] Likewise, the ability to work from home is clearly a matter of class and race, leading to perverse situation in which the likelihood of (often racialized) work being

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[23] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html; https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-deaths-race-ethnicity-04082020-1.pdf. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" seems terribly apt here (2007:247).

considered "essential" seems to be negatively related to compensation.[24] As Charles Blow succinctly puts it "social distancing is a privilege."[25]

In fact, a recent analysis by Richard Florida demonstrated that while density did matter to the spread and fatality of COVID-19, its impact was not straightforward.[26] Some very dense cities, like San Francisco and Singapore, have been relatively successful in avoiding the fate of similarly dense places like New York. Moreover, even within New York City the effects of COVID-19 were not clearly associated with density: as Florida notes, "Covid-19 is hitting hardest not in uber-dense Manhattan but in the less-dense outer boroughs, like the Bronx, Queens, and even far less dense Staten Island." He concludes that it is the intersection of class and density that matters: "It is not density in and of itself that seems to make cities susceptible, but the kind of density and the way it impacts daily work and living… Simply put, there is a huge difference between rich dense places, where people can shelter in place, work remotely, and have all of their food and other needs delivered to them, and poor dense places, which push people out onto the streets, into stores and onto crowded transit with one another."[27]

Conclusion: "I Want the Virus Now"

As I finish this essay in mid-April, 2020, there is some evidence that the curve is flattening, and perhaps even declining in New York City. Rates of increase of new cases and new hospitalizations have slowed, even as daily the number of deaths, a lagging indicator, continues

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[24] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/03/us/coronavirus-stay-home-rich-poor.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share; https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/business/economy/coronavirus-inequality.html. See also Graeber 2013 for a discussion of the general phenomenon of "bullshit work" that seems more relevant than ever.

[25] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/opinion/coronavirus-social-distancing.html

[26] https://www.citylab.com/equity/2020/04/coronavirus-spread-map-city-urban-density-suburbs-rural-data/609394/. A preliminary study by epidemiologist Moritz Kraemer indicated that while density was correlated with the length of an outbreak once it had taken hold; in an April 15 radio discussion, it was clear from comparisons of San Francisco that while density was a key factor, so too were like preferred mode of transportation, building type and density, and of course the policy implemented in response to the virus (https://www.wnyc.org/story/the-brian-lehrer-show-2020-04-15).

[27] A call perhaps, for the kind of work that Katz sees planetary urbanization theory as leaving undone.

to break records. There is a tiny glimmer of hope, even as bodies, disproportionately brown and black, accumulate in hospital morgues, and when they run out of space, refrigerated trucks and eventually perhaps in mass graves in the city's parks. But in rural America, fantasies of Covid-19 being an "urban disease" are being shattered as vulgar Wirthism crashes into the hard reality of interconnection. According to an analysis in the New York Times, between April 2 and April 8, the rate of infection in rural counties doubled, reaching the point where it was in urban counties around three weeks prior; the death rate in rural counties, driven by uneven access to medical care and the impacts of poverty, is catching up even faster.[28] That same account quoted a police chief from rural, southwest Georgia, who herself had contracted the virus: "Being from a small town, you think it's not going to touch us…We are so small and tucked away. You have a perception that it's in bigger cities." The vast majority of Americans — some 316 million — are now under state, city, or county stay-at-home directives, most of which were put in place over the past two weeks: that is to say some two months after the threat of the pandemic had become apparent to Federal government officials, and a week or two after the first wave of shutdowns in the states that were the home of initial urban outbreaks, like New York, California, and Washington.

So, the notion, rooted in vulgar Wirthism, that the virus would not jump the supposed urban-rural divide seems to have eroded, for the time being at least. The question the cost that this notion has imposed is impossible to answer with any specificity at the moment, but it seems safe to say that it is substantial. And this is without even considering the political reckoning that will come in the pandemic's aftermath, or perhaps even after its initial wave has crested. While it is possible that the pandemic will create new forms of cross-spatial solidarity, it is also almost

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[28] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/08/us/coronavirus-rural-america-cases.html

certain that vulgar Wirthism will aid in the generation of imagined fault lines along which blame can be distributed, with New York City (along with China) becoming the most obvious target.[29]

And it seems dreadfully possible that the necro-politicization of spiteful anti-urbanism will continue, and perhaps even intensify. On April 8, the worst day yet of the outbreak in the state, Kansas Republicans overturned the ban on large religious gatherings imposed by (also Republican) Governor Laura Kelly.[30] Roughly a week later, there were a series of right-wing demonstrations in Michigan, Ohio, and North Carolina. Protestors objected to what they perceived as government overreach and overreaction, calling for a rollback of state lockdowns and for individual choice in how to respond to the danger of Covid-19. They also revived the trolling chants of "Lock Her Up" (this time in reference to Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, rather Hillary Clinton) and refused pleas to stay in their cars, instead gathering in (defiantly non-socially-distanced) crowds on statehouse steps.[31]

All this came on the heels of a more extreme, and paradigmatic, articulation of spiteful politics. Shortly after Idaho's Republican governor Brad Little, in the face of infection rates higher than California's, issued a stay-at-home order for his state in late March, ultra-rightist member of the so-called "patriot movement" Ammon Bundy, whose rancher father Cliven Bundy led a 2014 armed standoff against federal officials seeking to enforce cattle-grazing regulations, and who himself lead the 2016 armed takeover Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon took to Facebook Live to object. Over the next two weeks, his "liberty rebellion" urged resistance, linking up with conservative Idaho elected official and religious leaders to plan for an

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[29] As Marshall notes above, this is already happening.

[30] https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/04/kansas-gop-cancels-large-gathering-ban-on-crisiss-worst-day.html

[31] https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200413/gop-lawmakers-protesters-call-on-dewine-to-begin-re-opening-ohio; https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/lock-her-anti-whitmer-coronavirus-lockdown-protestors-swarm-michigan-capitol-n1184426; https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/04/crowds-gather-to-protest-social-distancing.html.

(in-person) Easter service for up to a thousand people. [32] Then, rejecting the positions of (urban) medical professionals and epidemiologists, and arguing that they virus posed more of a danger to his liberty than it did to his health, he took things to the place where perhaps they had been inevitably been heading: "'I want the virus now,'" Mr. Bundy said.[33]

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[32] https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/04/ammon-bundy-i-want-the-virus-now.html; https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/03/self-quarantine-orders-meet-the-right-wing-militia-movement/
[33] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-idaho-bundy-patriot.html

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