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Eventocracy in a time of pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed a disruptive, new event-oriented politics in places like the United States and India. This essay looks at the emergent relationship between large-scale events, political subjectivity, and communities of sense and sense-making in the chaotic times of late-capitalism. It also asks if global crisis events like a pandemic can present opportunities to re-imagine new worlds in light of present-day challenges.

Key words: Capitalism, coronavirus, events, media, politics.

Meet the Eventocrats

Each passing day it becomes increasingly clear that we are living in the midst of a new global culture of politics. Let us call it *eventocracy*, following the innovative coining of this term by the writer-journalist Ravish Kumar.¹ As I have elaborated elsewhere, my use of the term differs somewhat from that of Kumar.² For me eventocracy names a hyper-mediated world governed by synchronic, seemingly chaotic and overpowering events. It is a world where politics is defined first and foremost by the imperative to control or at least dominate (on the airwaves, or on social media, or on the streets) the popular interpretation of

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decisive and often divisive events.

The rightwing chief executives of the world's largest democracy and its oldest one—Narendra Modi in India and Donald Trump in the United States, respectively—certainly act like they understand this. In any case, they cannot help but approach the current global mega-event—the Coronavirus Pandemic Crisis—in an avowedly eventocratic way.³

We could begin with US President Donald Trump's daily prime time press briefings, telecast on every major American news network and circulated as viral content soon after, well beyond national borders.⁴ These future media artifacts are in turn commented upon relentlessly on social media platforms for hours afterwards, before being buried underneath the next day's events as the news cycle begins again. Trump, denied his more favored method of eventocratic delivery (i.e. his speeches at campaign rallies before crowds of loyal supporters), transforms the "emergency" press conference into a politicized media event: an uninterrupted chance to reproduce the subjectivities of his base, piss off those that disagree with him, and remain at the center of public attention.⁵

An eventocratic figure if ever there was one, Trump pursues by new means his otherwise familiar political ends, claiming credit for anything he deems valuable for securing his interests, while blaming his hapless enemies—the "fake news" media, the Democrats, China, the Deep State, Muslims or whoever else is convenient—for everything else.⁶ Trump's apparent success in the nexus of media and politics today lies mostly in the fact that he embraces eventocracy's chaotic multiplicity: namely, the fact that it is different things to different constituencies. Unencumbered by the need to maintain ideological or even logical consistency from one event to the next, Trump thrives off the division that centers around his bloated public figure and the unpredictability of events.

Meanwhile in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi governs eventocratically but by different means. In the early days of the pandemic, he publically requested the editors of India's leading newspapers and media companies to "voluntarily" self-censor any

negative coverage of the government's response-efforts.⁷ Like any good eventocrat, Modi wants nothing less than monopoly control over the production and interpretation of media events. This is of course impossible in an even nominally open society, but it nevertheless serves as a sort of regulative-ideal for his political stage-craft and PR-oriented thinking. Such interpretive control is also an ego-ideal for his most ardent supporters, who are quick to charge as "seditious" or "anti-national" anyone who dares criticize their dear leader.

While Trump's approach to event management and manipulation is to resort to "saying the quiet part out loud" (and embarrassing his enemies more than he is capable of being embarrassed), Modi more often maintains "strategic silence" in the face of unfolding events and even mounting public criticism.⁸ He lets his loyalists and enemies fight it out on the streets and reproduce their subjectivities on the virtual "public" sphere of social media.⁹ In fact, unlike Trump, Modi refuses to hold press conferences with journalists, even after his own self-authored calamitous events, like the surprise and widely lambasted policy of demonetization in 2016, or the controversial abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution in 2019.¹⁰ Rather, Modi allows these and other sensational events to pass him by without comment, as an army of paid and unpaid loyalists (often called "Bakhts" for their undying devotion to Modi) assembles the dominant narrative around these events so well that Modi does not need to speak.

When he does speak, however, it is under conditions he alone controls. So that Modi uses weekly radio addresses and his official Twitter handle to announce new initiatives to respond to the novel coronavirus pandemic in India. These at first appear selfless and compassionate and are interpreted as such by his supporters, including the "mainstream" press. But upon closer scrutiny even these become continuous with his usual eventocratic regimen: personality and PR-driven politics where the only personality that matters is his, and the only public that counts is comprised of his supporters. In April 2020 Modi announced that he was creating a brand new "public" trust to

collect donations for the government's response-efforts against the spreading virus.¹¹ The abbreviated name of the trust, PM CARES (for "Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations") Fund, struck some as odd.¹² For was not the point to get the public (not the PM) to care enough to donate money? Was it not already understood that the PM "cares"? Isn't that his job?

As in much of Modi's regime, this action is structurally opaque and arguably unnecessary.¹³ An existing trust fund, the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund, has been in place since 1948 to raise money for precisely these kinds of disastrous events. The government could have simply modernized the existing trust by creating an easy-to-use digital platform to solicit donations big and small. No matter, better to build from scratch something completely new (and conveniently opaque), as Modi asks the nation to put their trust in him and him alone. *He* cares. A Modified biopolitics filtered through eventocracy.¹⁴

A week before this, in a prime time televised speech—another typical Modi event—the prime minister announced a three-week shutdown for the entire country.¹⁵ He declared, "There will be a total ban of coming out of your homes. Every state, every district, every lane, every village will be under lockdown." The ban would commence that midnight, giving citizens just four hours to prepare. As many were quick to note, however, millions of Indians were impoverished migrant workers, and would need more than four hours to rearrange their lives for a twenty-one-day quarantine. Hundreds of thousands would have to figure out a way back to their home villages, having been barred from working and evicted from the cities in which they took up precarious employment. In any case, the government gave little aid or guidance, leaving thousands to undertake the journeys home by foot, with little money, food or supplies.¹⁶ A significant number of these workers may have also been carrying the virus back with them from large cities to their villages dispersed around the country. The coming weeks and months will tell the story of the costs and consequences of this governmental negligence. But whether Modi himself will pay any price, electoral

or otherwise, is another story altogether. For eventocratic figures have a way of surviving even the most turbulent and disastrous of events.

Sense and Event

Large-scale crises (in the original Greek meaning of the word *krisis*, which means decision, determination, judgment)¹⁷ threaten to disrupt life as we know it everywhere: climate change and “natural” disasters, financial panics and great recessions, acts of terroristic violence and virtual warfare, sudden popular uprisings, and most recently, the Coronavirus Pandemic. To posit a concept of eventocracy in a time of global crisis is to attempt to theoretically account for an unknowable quantity of chaos and contingency in our collective lives, contingencies that simply were not sensible to most before. To invoke the philosopher Alain Badiou, the event which precedes the crisis (which demands the decision), is precisely that which could not have been predicted or deduced beforehand according to the known coordinates of the real and the prevailing laws of the dominant situation.¹⁸

A bit about the situation: the “consensus” that there is a “common sense” dominant reality is an achievement. It is a social performance that must be produced and reproduced over and over again, because it sutures together two heterogeneous elements—expectations and what *happens* to meet them—in everyday social life.¹⁹ By mediating between expectations of the real and their common sensibility among diverse communities of sense-making, the “happening” becomes an event that momentarily binds together and disciplines an otherwise heterogeneous, unruly sensible milieu.²⁰

We can see this unruly behavior (myself included at times—I admit) on social platforms like Twitter and Facebook. These are conflicts and confrontations between contending communities of sense. Without getting into the “invisible” politics of algorithms, economies of information vectors and the psycho-corporeal aspects of screen culture, we can note a perhaps unobvious continuity between the current age of the Internet and the pre-digital age.²¹ Modern times have always encouraged the hiding of

social relations and antagonisms behind letters and discourse, where they can take on new, unrecognizable forms.²² Now these confrontations are out in the open because everyone has access to their own digital letters and self-authored discourses. The distance and anonymity among users also helps. It is easier to be rude to those you cannot see. Perhaps this is why we are so much nicer to each other on Instagram.

Yet how fragile these communities of sense and sense-making really are, and how continuously they need to be reproduced and sustained? To write about eventocracy in the time of a global pandemic is also to simultaneously affirm that an inescapable struggle today is the one over the popular interpretation of these crisis events. For these are events which force us to make ideological decisions everyday (even though we don't recognize them as such): to take part in an unfolding historical sequence initiated by some consequential event. In these micro-decisions we evaluate and judge, picking apart the facts and the fictions, dividing actual from fake news, ordering the real according to what we see and hear, and reason and feel.²³ As we get mediatized into different sensible milieus, different communities of sense-making, we pick an interpretive side and stick with it so as to navigate the rapidly changing situations while hanging on to (by defending) our egos.²⁴ Some events are big enough to get us to alter our consciousness about particular issues, but most merely reconfirm our unconscious presuppositions. Eventocracy as a critical concept makes manifest the subjectivities that can potentially emerge from unforeseen disruptions in the dominant situation, such as it is, and the performative interpretations that mediate (in the sense of actively *making* meaning, of fabricating sense out of) the chaosmos of the global present.²⁵

The Inoperative Event

The writer Arundhati Roy recently described the pandemic in India as a portal, a possible threshold into a newly imagined world. "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."²⁶

Yet before we can imagine such a world, we need to address a more pessimistic one. Namely, that in two of the biggest eventocracies of today the portal which Roy describes is more of a mirror, or even a magnifying glass, trained on the preexisting situation in place before the pandemic began. Rather than opening up a potential for change in the dominant situation in both India and the US, the pandemic has instead unearthed familiar demons in all-too-predictable ways. As Roy herself writes in her essay, rabid Islamophobia and utter disregard for the lives of the poorest in Modi's India, and as others have observed in the context of Trump's United States, the racialization of class inequality and the accompanying vitriol on the part of the ruling conservative party towards even the mildest forms of wealth redistribution to mitigate the economic fallout of the pandemic.²⁷

Add to this the fact that in both countries we are likely to see what Naomi Klein has called "disaster capitalism" in the form of financial manipulation and rapacious profiteering by predatory actors in order to "save" national economies, key industries and large banks in the crisis-ridden present.²⁸ This "disaster relief" will be followed by fiscal austerity imposed on workers for the foreseeable future.

In such a post-crisis world we are likely to see the continual exposure of "bare life" on a global scale, but through updated inversions of geohistorical difference.²⁹ Thus we are witness to the "thirdworldification" of the developed west and "Americanization" of the underdeveloped regions. Even as the death toll mounts everyday in the United States (with disproportionate numbers of the racialized poor succumbing to the disease), there is talk by conservatives in power to reopen the quarantined economy.³⁰ Trump, ever aware of his dipping poll numbers and the fact that, if the economy continues to plummet, so too will his reelection odds, is likely to listen to these right wing interests. This will all but guarantee the persistence of the virus for months (with thousands more likely dying or getting critically ill) in the absence of over-the-counter therapeutics, wide public testing or effective vaccination. What is an acceptable death count? At what point is the response to the pandemic worse

than the pandemic itself? Were not these people (primarily old and immunocompromised and weak) going to soon die anyway? These are the questions we hear being whispered as America's capitalist common sense confronts its potential collapse.

Meanwhile in India, we get a different assemblage: the phantasmagoric psycho-culture of American consumerism re-mixed with the postcolonial insecurities of the Indian middle class, mediated by the eventocratic performances of the still wildly-popular Modi.³¹ The latter imagines policy-making as if most of the country were comfortably bourgeois and Hindu, dwelling in stable homes in which they could easily self-isolate for three weeks or longer, surviving without pay, or working from home via computer, emerging every evening to joyfully bang on pots and pans and light candles in honor of the "collective" sacrifice they were all making.³² Then again, this middle class has been imagining itself living in a virtual America (segregated from "third world India") for years now thanks to neoliberal urbanism and the spatial inequalities it has concretized in urban and suburban India.³³ Modi's events help these "globalized" elites feel better about the perpetual failures of this virtual America to properly materialize in India. They also take public attention away from an already lackluster Indian economy (even prior to the pandemic) by locating a convenient enemy to demonize for all the failures of the present: Muslims, Dalits, leftists, anti-nationals, Maoists, Naxals, urban Naxals, Pakistan, China, etc. In fact, just as public criticism began to mount against the Modi government's callous lack of regard and planning for migrant workers and the newly unemployed after the nation-wide lockdown, right wing media predictably found a more apt target for blame. As Roy writes:

The mainstream media has incorporated the Covid story into its 24/7 toxic anti-Muslim campaign. An organisation called the Tablighi Jamaat, which held a meeting in Delhi before the lockdown was announced, has turned out to be a "super spreader". That is being used to stigmatise and demonise Muslims. The overall tone suggests that Muslims invented the virus and have deliberately spread it as a form of jihad.

To what extent will the event of the Coronavirus Pandemic as

event succeed in exposing these existing structures of racial capitalism in America and Hindu nationalism in India for what they are: violent and contradictory and self-destructive? I conclude this essay by considering not so much the constitutive power of eventocracy, the way it produces and reproduces existing right wing subjectivities in places like India and the US, but rather, the destituent power of eventocracy, borrowing some insights from the thinker Giorgio Agamben.

Agamben develops the concept of destituent power to contrast it with constituent power, which was famously elaborated in, among other places, Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence."³⁴ As Agamben argues, "if revolutions and insurrections correspond to constituent power, that is, a violence that establishes and constitutes the new law, in order to think a destituent power we have to imagine completely other strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics."³⁵

Destituent power is not the opposite of constituent power, namely the violence that founds the state and the law that preserves it. Rather, it seeks to render the violence of the law and the state "inoperative." Agamben argues that when one renders power inoperative, one "exposes it," and one potentializes it, opening it up to other political possibilities. He elaborates with the vivid example of poetic language:

What is a poem, in fact, if not an operation taking place in language that consists in rendering inoperative, in deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to a new possible use? What the poem accomplishes for the potentiality of speaking, politics and philosophy must accomplish for the power of acting. Rendering inoperative the biological, economic and social operations, they show what the human body can do, opening it a new possible use.³⁶

To render eventocracy inoperative is not to negate the power of events but to open them to new possible use. From this vantage point we can revisit Arundhati Roy's point about the coronavirus pandemic. Employing the inoperative power of poetic language, Roy reimagines the pandemic event in its radically inoperative mode, as a portal:

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.³⁷

Notes:

¹ Kumar, 'Welcome the Eventocracy, Tracked by Comedia'.

² Kalyan, 'Eventocracy'.

³ Coronavirus disease 2019, or Covid-19, is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2. The disease was first identified in Wuhan, capital of China's Hubei province, before spreading globally, resulting in the coronavirus pandemic. For further information, see, 'Coronavirus'.

⁴ Nicholas, 'The Real Point of Trump's Coronavirus Press Conferences'.

⁵ Smith, 'Are Trump's Coronavirus Briefings the New 2020 Campaign Rallies?'

⁶ Boczkowski and Papacharissi, *Trump and the Media*.

⁷ Goel, Gettleman, and Khandelwal, 'Under Modi, India's Press Is Not So Free Anymore'.

⁸ Slater, 'India's Modi Has a Strategy for Dealing with Controversies'.

⁹ There is a growing literature on Modi's use of social media and other forms of publicity to manage his political support. See Sinha, 'Mediatized Populisms| Fragile Hegemony'. Kapoor and Dwivedi, 'Metamorphosis of Indian Electoral Campaigns', 496–516.

¹⁰ Chaturvedi, 'Mute Modi'.

¹¹ For more information about PM Cares, see: <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/about-pm-cares-fund/>.

¹² 'Coronavirus'.

¹³ Harit, 'Would Narendra Modi Please Care to Answer Some Questions About PM-CARES?'

¹⁴ Lazzarato, 'From Biopower to Biopolitics'.

¹⁵ Harit, 'Would Narendra Modi Please Care to Answer Some Questions About PM-CARES?'

¹⁶ Roy, 'Arundhati Roy'.

¹⁷ 'Crisis | Origin and Meaning of Crisis by Online Etymology Dictionary'.

¹⁸ This is how Alain Badiou defines the event, as that which was unforeseeable from within the world of the existing situation, the status quo. Badiou, *Being and Event*.

¹⁹ This formulation of "expectations and what happens to meet them" is borrowed from Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, whose thinking informs the argument about mediation through social and visual media events and the politics of sensibility (or aesthetics, as

Ranciere puts it) that is at stake in such mediations. See Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, 3.

²⁰ See two texts about sense and/as event here: Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime*. Shapiro's post-Kantian, Deleuzean-informed take on the relationship between sublime events and the communities of sense they potentially disrupt and transform is especially pertinent here.

²¹ For more on the politics of algorithms from a critical race perspective, see Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*. For more on the political economy of information vectors, see Wark, *Capital Is Dead*.

²² Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*.

²³ Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', 117–39.

²⁴ My analysis here is informed by the work of Ashis Nandy on political psychology and the work of ego-defense in oppressive societies. See Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*.

²⁵ The concept of performative interpretation comes from the work of Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx*, which takes inspiration from the phantasmagoria of commodity production under capitalism in order to explore the spectral eventuality of the post-communist era. Here ideology becomes performatively interpretative as it deals with the excesses and uncertainties of the transition to global capitalism: "a kind of interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets" (1994: 51). See Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. The concept of chaosmos comes from Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* Chaos plays the modified role of "neumena" in their post-phenomenological, post-Kantian perspective, haunting the various structures of modern subjectivity that ostensibly defend against it: "This is all that we ask for in order to *make an opinion* for ourselves, like a sort of "umbrella" which protects us from chaos" (1994: 202).

²⁶ Roy, 'Arundhati Roy'.

²⁷ Smith, 'Inequality Is Immune to the Coronavirus'.

²⁸ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.

²⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

³⁰ Stein and Costa, 'White House Aides, Outside Groups Launch Effort to Reopen Economy, but Mnuchin Says Decision Poses Risks'.

³¹ 'PM Modi Remains Popular despite Mounting Criticism since Lok Sabha Win, Shows MOTN Poll'.

³² 'Indians Bang Pots and Pans to Support Virus Fight'.

³³ For more on neoliberal urbanism and spatial inequality in contemporary India, see Rohan Kalyan, 2017. *Neo Delhi and the Politics of Postcolonial Urbanism*. London: Routledge.

³⁴ Benjamin, *Reflections*.

³⁵ Agamben, "What Is a Destituent Power," 70.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Roy, 'Arundhati Roy'.

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