One Nation Under Lockdown[1]

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[1] This response is a collaboration between colleagues in a spring 2020 graduate seminar on "Risk in Contemporary Culture" at Virginia Tech. As the COVID-19 pandemic derailed and overshadowed the course syllabus, we began engaging with risk literature in more visceral and fragmented ways. This essay is one attempt to reassemble and contextualize those fragments.

In "Pandemic Science and Politics," Daniel Sarewitz addresses the role of science in guiding policy and decision-making in the United States during the first two weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.[2] The facts on the ground and the pattern of daily life when this article was published on March 25 starkly contrast with our current state of affairs, only a few weeks later. The WHO situation report from the same day showed a United States with an official count of 51,914 confirmed cases (9,750 new) and 673 deaths (202 new). "Slow the Spread: President Trump's Coronavirus Guidelines for America" (dated March 16, 2020) had already been delivered to mailboxes across the country. Journalists attending White House Coronavirus Task Force briefings had only just begun socially distancing in earnest.[3] In the space of a few weeks, the data, science, policies, and values surrounding COVID-19 have evolved dramatically. While Sarewitz avoids the tempting prognostications that often accompany pandemic response analysis and commentary, his article raises a number of concepts and questions that deserve addressing.

Over the first two months of the pandemic, the complexities have become increasingly apparent. Even factoring in the diachronic differences of Sarewitz's analysis *in the moment*, he appears to sidestep the already emergent global complexity.[4] He argues that the hesitancy and resistance normally accompanying scientific uncertainty have been overcome by the irrefutable visibility of the pandemic's effects and readily evidenced by near real-time hypothesis testing. While admitting some persistent partisanship in the context of the then ongoing congressional debates for the initial economic relief package, he suggests that these political differences were in the process of collapsing from the simpatico relationship between scientists and the lay-public, tethered together by "common values." This final claim appeared to hold true as the $2 trillion dollar CARES Act was signed into law two days later, following what may have been Senate Majority Leader McConnell's vaguest gestures toward brinkmanship when the Senate performatively took the weekend off as the House was busy on a Saturday finalizing an early draft of the bill.

While this sort of essay—short and provocative, tentative and synchronic, crystallizing and general—requires a reductive approach, Sarewitz's gestures to a broader public with a "shared sense of our commonality as humans" comes across as overly romantic. Consider how the most vulnerable among us might already interpret bleary-eyed appeals to a "common good." [5] His insights are much more cogent and nuanced with respect to the elite

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[2] The WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020 and officially declared the novel coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

[3] The Coronavirus Task Force press briefing as late as March 21 had journalists occupying only every other seat. On March 25, there were 2-3 seats between each journalist, an arrangement so novel that, while waiting for the President, Secretary of Treasury Steve Mnuchin commented to Ambassador Dr. Deborah Birx on "how good" the social distancing was. Dr. Birx then hopes out loud that the photographers are capturing the scene from their perspective to send "a great message to the American people."

[4] The United Kingdom's dalliance with "herd immunity" had only shifted several days prior, following the March 16, 2020 Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team "Report 9: Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to reduce COVID-19 mortality and healthcare demand" that projected 510,000 dead in Great Britain and 2.2 million dead in United States by August without any control measures.

[5] For further consideration of the disability community in the context of COVID-19 see Ashley Shew's "Let COVID-19 Expand Awareness of Disability Tech" May 5, 2020. *Nature* 581, 9.

domain of experts, scientists, and policy-makers. There is certainly no fault in his core message of hope and solidarity. However, full consideration of broader public solidarity—the very basis for this hope—receives short shrift.

In terms of Steve Fuller's "Fourth Order Thinking About the Pandemic: A Transhumanist Challenge," Sarewitz effectively superimposes first and second order thinking into a global (but not totalizing) conception of "shared values."[6] In other words, "winning the fight over the virus" and "winning the fight over what 'winning the fight' means," are not separate conversations. Given the relatively high degree of international cooperation and alignment with the WHO recommendations during the second half of March, such convergence seems entirely justified. He concludes with a passionate third order argument (with fourth order implications), that we are learning through experience that the nexus of science and politics serves humanity best when it is guided by "common values, not expert assertions of facts." In this, at least, Sarewitz is prescient because our commonalities have been fracturing at every level of socio-political organization and the four orders of thinking have begun diverging along mutually incompatible paths.

Sidestepping Complexity

"COVID-19 is a hard problem, but not a complex one … It's that a shared sense of our commonality as humans is the essential condition of a society that has the tools to deal with its problems." Sarewitz appears to be arguing that because of the united common values surrounding the pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis is not complicated. But over the past few months, the complexities of the problem have become increasingly apparent.

The challenge with COVID-19 begins with where to draw the boundary. Such thinking is oriented in and between first and second order discourses. To win the fight with COVID-19 do we need to simply understand the virus from a medical perspective and explain what it is doing to the body? Even that is more difficult than it may first appear. The retrospective analysis of patients from autopsies continues to show bizarre patterns—among them, the blood-clotting complications referenced in the headline here.[7] It also appears possible that there are multiple strains and that there is considerable variation in symptoms based on geography. Based on that information, location and region suddenly play a critical role in understanding the virus. And so the boundary grows. It is now recognized that the virus is a global risk, agnostic of country borders and local regions. From there, the complexity increases as COVID-19, the ambivalence of its presence/absence, influences all spaces in our lives: schools, hospitals, workplaces, shopping centers, and traveling through the liminal spaces between are all reconfigured, remapped, and redefined by our understanding of this virus.

The virus also disrupts our constructions of temporality. The complexity continues to expand as scientists, policy makers, and the public look toward the future. Underlying the

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[6] First published on April 17, 2020 at Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies.
[7] "A Mysterious Blood-Clotting Complication is Killing Coronavirus Patients" (*Washington Post*, April 4, 2020).

unanswered questions regarding the virus itself are the challenges surrounding the re-opening of the economy. When is it acceptable to reopen the economy, with minimal risk to public health, and most importantly who gets to decide? Much of the decision-making surrounding the re-opening businesses and government is based on *liability*. As the Reuters article notes, some businesses are looking for ways to avoid or limit their liability for related coronavirus decisions to re-open.[8] The argument would go that if they operate in compliance with the "official" guidance from the government, they ought to be somehow protected. This is just one example of the challenges of liability and responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to protect the public from the virus—is it the government's, companies' or the public's? While COVID-19 is already a difficult problem, its complexity continues to expand and change seemingly every day. Again, the real question regarding complexity is where the boundary is drawn. Do we simply circumscribe the virus itself? Should we include all primary, secondary, and tertiary dimensions of pandemic response?[9]

Uncertainty / Visibility

Along with the challenges of complexity, Sarewitz raises some intriguing questions regarding the roles of uncertainty and visibility. "Indeed, scientists and policy-makers are for the most part being open about the significant uncertainties surrounding the disease and its future course." This rings true, especially compared to other scientific framings for "evidence-based" policymaking. Sarewitz goes on to note that "with COVID-19, convergent values about what we want to accomplish means that uncertainty (about the science and about the decisions that are being be [sic] taken) does not block action—everyone agrees both on the need to act and on the desired goal." This bears out in the construction of pandemic rhetoric on timelines and national contexts. We see Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* fulfilled where "the center of risk consciousness lies not in the present, but *in the future*," when for weeks U.S. facing media has reverberated with the refrain: Italy's today is our *tomorrow*.[10] A case most surprisingly made by former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in his March 13 plea from *on the ground* in Italy that "America Must Act Now—and Act Big." [11]

Again, this has changed significantly since late March, but the challenges regarding uncertainty remain. Many think that uncertainty can be reduced or even eradicated with additional information, research, or even more time to understand the problem. But Asselt and Vos and others argue more knowledge does not mean that there will be less uncertainty.[12] Science in turn is often seen as that objective tool that can be used to reduce

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[8] "Corporate America Seeks Legal Protection for When Coronavirus Lockdowns Lift" (Reuters, April 21, 2020).

[9] But of course the challenge then becomes, what does the COVID-19 problem not include? Defining the boundary of any risk or issues continues to be difficult. Similar to the challenge that is faced with some of Perrow's arguments—what is included (or not included) in a system?

[10] Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. SAGE publications, 34.

[11] Though, Gingrich appears to have walked back some of his previous *Newsweek* earnestness on the "Therefore, What?" podcast on May 6, 2020, stating "I would argue we've overreacted".

[12] van Asselt, Marjolein B. A. and Ellen Vos. 2006. "The Precautionary Principle and the Uncertainty Paradox." *Journal of Risk Research* 9 (4): 313-336.

situations of uncertainty or risk. But again science too has its limitations. What happens when *more science* fails to reduce uncertainty? What happens when people or countries are faced with continuous uncertainty surrounding an issue? Even if we trust each other to do the *right thing*, as Sarewitz suggests we were doing, what if scientific experts and policy-makers no longer offer reliable assurances of what that *right thing* is?

Today uncertainty continues to grow around a number of issues, including the mixed messaging on national testing efforts. Testing was identified as a critical need three months ago and seemingly ought to be very straight-forward. While it is encouraging to see additional countries ([Germany as the latest](#)) able to roll out nationwide antibody testing, it raises the question why things have been so slow here, so political. It appears now that as more time goes by, integrity and credibility of information are being lost. Fact-based press briefings have turned instead into extended sessions with odd, often misleading talking points, wasting the time of many key CDC officials, who might otherwise be focused on problem-solving.

Sarewitz goes on to argue that this situation is different from "more conventional interactions between science and politics, where competing sides enlist their own experts who then have a strong incentive to speak with more than warranted certainty." There is definitely value in scientists admitting the uncertainty that surrounds COVID-19, but is there a problem with too much uncertainty? Is scientific uncertainty in some ways contributing to the different reactions that people across the US are having to this pandemic? We see each state interpreting (or ignoring) science around COVID-19 and making their own determinations about what are relevant facts (and what are common values). On March 24, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey made these state-to-state differences emphatic, stating ["we're not California, we're not New York, we aren't even Louisiana"](#) in defense of not issuing a stay-at-home order. Even when the national response seemed most unified, cracks in first order thinking were already beginning to form.

What Role do Common Values Have in Science?

"Above all, we are learning that science's place in politics is determined not by the logic of facts, but by the fundamental influence of human values." In the case of COVID-19, "[c]ommon values, not expert assertions about facts, are what make science good enough to act on." Sarewitz appears to be writing this in a more idealistic sense. He posits common values shared by all, which are: stay home and keep everyone safe. But since March, these common values don't seem quite so common after all. Instead, we are seeing a divergence of human value paradigms. As the country and world look toward the future, the definition of 'common' becomes muddied. So if common values are out, then where does that leave science? If neither facts nor values are the primary aspect driving decisions, one needs to determine what new value to use. Are we coming back to Starr's 1969 bar, where death is the only measure we'll accept as "risk"?

The final challenge with understanding and defining common values (and what their role will be) resides in the larger question of who gets to decide. Sarewitz's article focuses primarily

on the interactions between policy-makers and scientists, with limited attention spent on the public. The public's role in this crisis must be highlighted more. Values perhaps more common among the general public influence the choices of elite decisionmakers. The public understanding of scientific facts and their interpretation of the COVID-19 risks plays a critical role in the future of this situation.

United in Discovering a New Normal?

On the surface of the article, one sees the limitations of a seemingly romanticized idea that politics were being set aside to fight COVID-19. As addressed above, common values, uncertainty, and a common understanding of science is not as simple as Sarewitz originally argued. It has become increasingly apparent that the COVID-19 situation is not just another difficult problem but rather a very complex one that extends beyond the boundaries of just science or policies. Despite these drawbacks, Sarewitz's article offers an uplifting message. He states that "for this crisis, the things that unite us are outranking those that divide us."

While we certainly see that many people are not united on all aspects of this pandemic, there are certain things that do unite us. We are all counting the days, whether it is the days since schools have closed or perhaps the days since seeing family or friends. Everyone is navigating uncertain terrain. It may be the shifting logistics of going into work, the learning curve of telework, or facing unemployment. For many it is suddenly having to homeschool children. For all of us, it is trying to maintain some sense of whatever 'normalcy' is now. Everyone is missing something: graduations, family vacations, birthdays, time with friends and family. Perhaps that is what Sarawitz meant when he stated "we know what COVID-19 is because we see it around us." We all can see it in the news reports, but more saliently, we see it in all of these missed events and modified schedules; we see the days we've counted. In that sense, we are all inevitably united in defining a new 'normal.'