<div align="center">**Un-Masking the Mask:**</div>

<div align="center">**Developing the Sociology of Facial Politics in Pandemic Times and After**</div>

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## Introduction

The story goes that, when he was asked what he thought were the consequences of the French Revolution, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai replied that it was still too early to tell. The same can be said of the Covid-19 pandemic. No-one knows yet how the pandemic and its multiple and complicated effects will alter the textures of all aspects of life, human and non-human, across the planet in the coming years and decades. But it is already clear that, sociologically speaking, some of the consequences are already obvious in general terms. Existing social inequalities and power imbalances have been variously reinforced, extended, and worsened. This is so in terms of all the major sociological axes: class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, location, legal status, and suchlike (Steele 2020). Meanwhile, new inequities are being forged. Conversely, potential novel forms of solidarity and positive social transformation may be in the making, including in terms of modes and forms of citizenship. This is the terrain that a new sociology of masks, masking and facial politics will now have to grapple with.

In the normative terms of critical sociology, both negative and positive processes are currently at play, even if the former seem likely to outweigh the latter. This is certainly the case in one of the most striking phenomena of what could be called Covid-19 times, namely the sudden appearance across most parts of the globe of facemasks, worn as protection against infection. Although such masks have been common in many parts of East Asia for a considerable period of time, especially in the wake of the SARS crisis of 2003 (Syed et al 2003), mass masking has not been a central feature of social life in most other world regions until Covid-19 struck. And just as the disease most likely came from East Asia and spread across the planet, so too has mass masking seemed to spread from there too, following in the wake of the virus. Covid-19 and its attendant masking practices are twin and inseparable elements of a certain kind of *Asianification of the world* (Park, 2019). Of course, the sociologist must be vigilant in making such claims: that apparently neutral statement is itself a kind of observation which right-wing political actors may choose to reframe and promote for their own purposes.[1]

## From the Anthropology of Masks to the Sociology of Masking

It is now clear that both masking practices and the politics surrounding masking have rapidly become major social phenomena in most parts of the world, and therefore they merit serious sociological attention. Masking has not been of great interest to sociology up until now. When issues to do with masks have entered the discussions of sociologists and related scholarly practitioners, it has mostly been at the level of metaphor than of concrete materiality. Goffman-inspired analyses of "face work", for example, are well attuned to the idea that when persons perform their identities, social roles, emotional states, and other things to other people, they are "putting on a mask", just like an actor in an ancient Greek play who would put on a physical

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/30/donald-trump-coronavirus-chinese-lab-claim

mask to communicate similar matters to the audience (Goffman 1967).

But the study of physical masks *per se* has generally been left to other disciplines, especially anthropology. There is a large anthropological literature (summarised in Inglis 2017), dating back many decades, as to the roles physical masks play in social life, especially in explicitly ritualised contexts. Some of the major findings from that literature are as follows. Because masks stylize the human face, they are intimately associated with the projection of personal and social identities, as well as transformations of identity. Since at least ancient Greece, Western culture has had obsessions with the – mostly negative – social consequences of covering the eyes, because these are assumed to be the "windows to the soul", and so covering them means hiding one's true character and intentions. But outside the West, it has often been the covering of the nose, mouth or ears that has been the focus of symbolism, attention, and concern. Masks often thematise and dramatise issues of life and death. Masks are objects often invested with great power. For example, they can operate as forms of protection, especially in ritual settings. If "we compare a shaman's mask and an astronaut's helmet, we find that they are not so dissimilar if we understand them both as protective armour" (Nunley 1999: 7).

Masks are also ambiguous objects, and their wearers can be responded to by other people in ambivalent ways, especially as the masked persons may be understood as dangerous. Mask-based performances to audiences may work or may fail, depending on how non-masked others react. Masks are strongly associated with both social order and disorder. In terms of ordering the world, masks can be used by religious functionaries in benign ways to frame and reconcile social and cosmological tensions. Masks may also be used by some violently to impose a specific vision of social order on others, such as in the case of masked figures like Ku Klux Klansmen terrorising other people. Masking practices are often highly gendered. In many societies, masked men in secret societies have sought to impose gendered norms on women, although the latter may resist such attempts (Inglis 2017). Masks are also bound up with social dis-ordering and re-ordering. Masks play significant roles in the representation of crime and deviance. Avenging figures like Batman, Zorro, and the Lone Ranger gain power to right wrongs by being masked. Authority groups have often been concerned that masking allows people to do things they otherwise would not be able to do or would not even think of doing. For example, in early modern Catholic Europe, both Christian and secular authorities were worried about the scope for outrageous behaviours among the masked crowds of carnival festivities (Twycross and Carpenter 2002).

Overall, the anthropological literature shows that, across the world and throughout history, the mask and associated practices have been marked by deep ambivalences, and these have also been strongly connected with social contradictions and the resolving of them. Sociologists should now be reading that literature for clues as to how to understand in new and deeper ways the many facets of Covid-19-related masking, as well as the politics which surround such phenomena. That way, current masking practices and politics can be compared with what we already know about such matters, and how masking has played out in different societies around the world at different times. Only then will the true specificity and novelty of Covid-19-related masking become really apparent. The sociology of masks certainly has an important role to play here, as it can be particularly attuned to the nuances of everyday practices, whereas the anthropology of masking has tended much more to focus on highly ritualised times and spaces, which are deliberately set apart from quotidian rhythms and dynamics.

Any sociological study of masks and masking practices and politics needs to address two fundamental questions to its specific empirical subject matter. These are: *what is involved*, and *why has this happened, or why is it happening?* Answers to the latter question may come at a range of levels, stretching from immediate, micro-level situations, to broader cultural contexts and social-structural conditions, both national and transnational, through to the kinds of more general "anthropological" phenomena to be found across time and space, and which have occurred before, albeit with different local colourings, at other times and in other places (Inglis 2017).

## Reinforcing and Extending Social Problems and Fractures

Certain illnesses and diseases, such as cancer and AIDS, have often been spoken about as if they were independent and quasi-conscious actors in themselves, which are somehow actively evil in intent (Sontag 1989). There are similar kinds of discourses circulating worldwide today about Covid-19. But the sociologist can see that social order is deeply reflected in, and refracted through, the Coronavirus. Hence it is misleading, because it is un-sociological, to speak of Covid-19 as an independent and wholly autonomous actor, and of its multiple effects as if they derived from that actor alone. A properly sociological understanding would instead say that the real issue is how the virus has been *handled* by multiple collective actors. How governmental and health authorities in a region or country have organised their responses to the virus has in fact shaped what the virus "is" and what it can do. It is not the virus "itself", but rather the different sorts of social organisation of the virus, that have produced the various observable effects, which in popular parlance are instead ascribed directly to the virus, as if it somehow acts on its own. If both the virus and its consequences are thoroughly bound up with forms of social organisation, then it follows that existing social problems and fractures, which are (mostly unwittingly) expressed in policies and initiatives intended to deal with the virus, will then be made manifest in the handling of the pandemic. That in turn will profoundly shape the nature and effects of the virus in a specific territory (Strong 1990). This includes in terms of gender inequalities, with women being affected more dramatically than men.[2]

For example, deep-seated forms of classism, sexism and racism may be expressed in policies and practices, such that the handling of the virus is deeply marked by these, making classist, sexist and racist outcomes of the pandemic situation highly likely. Therefore, in terms of masks worn as responses to the virus, we would expect masking practices to be thoroughly bound up with these dynamics and with the existing social divisions, fractures and inequalities which underpin them. Although it is still too early to expect fully-fledged social scientific studies of such matters, journalistic evidence has begun to give us an idea of some elementary dynamics at work in and across different places.

We can already see that the virus inordinately affects and kills disadvantaged social groups, because the already-existing patterns of disadvantage create the lines along which the spread of the virus proceeds. Wearing a mask in overcrowded ghetto conditions will not save you from infection, nor will it do so if you are working in a job associated with low paid workers (Marà and Pulignano 2020). Nor will a mask protect you if you are of a despised social minority. Indeed, quite the opposite may be true. To take examples just from the specific realm of

policing: a black man may fear to walk into a shop in the USA while masked, for fear of being taken for a robber and then arrested or shot by the police[3]; and corrupt police officers in Mexico may use alleged violations of new masking rules as the excuse to arrest or even kill poor and/or indigenous people.[4]

Conversely, for the relatively socially privileged, and certainly for social elites, wearing a mask, including those made by fashion designers, is more a lifestyle choice than an enforced necessity, because the social spaces in which one operates are much less likely to be highly infectious. Nonetheless, there have been various high-profile cases of elites catching the virus when it invaded their otherwise protected, peaceful and secluded locales, which then created calls for masking to be made compulsory in these previously untroubled enclaves.[5] More generally, across both more and less privileged social locations, masking can entrench and exacerbate existing divisions of politics and politicised identities, with masks becoming highly-charged symbols in ongoing culture wars. In the USA, wearing a mask has been taken as a sign of being a Democrat, and therefore anti-Trump, which then brings the risk of the mask-wearer being thrown out of stores and other places where the owner has right-wing political allegiances.[6] Sociology of masking will need to pay close attention to the mechanisms whereby masks will likely become ever more highly politicised in multiple other national and regional contexts.

## Reforming Citizenship and Space

Masking does not only reflect and reproduce existing social problems. It is also thoroughly tied up with the creation of new social dynamics. A central issue of Covid-19-related masking is the degree to which it is practiced by the majority or a minority of a given population. For at least 15 years, mass masking has been the everyday norm in many East Asian cities. In such contexts, not to wear a facemask is likely to be considered as a deviant act, a rebellion against the social norm of covering the lower half of the face. However, in locations where masking has only started to become a mass phenomenon within the course of a few months, the norm of whether to mask is more ambiguous and open to contestation.

Some countries have made wearing masks in public mandatory. Countries that had imposed the wearing of masks by the end of May 2020 included Venezuela, Vietnam, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, UAE, Cuba, Ecuador, Austria, Morocco, Turkey, El Salvador, Chile, Cameroon, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Nigeria, Israel, Argentina, Poland, Luxemburg, Jamaica, Germany, Bahrain, Qatar, Honduras, Uganda, France, Spain, South Korea and Lebanon.[7] These regulations vary in terms of how comprehensive they are, ranging from dealing with anywhere outside the home, through to specific public places, such as public transport or supermarkets. Sanctions and law enforcement regimes vary greatly from one country to another.

In cities and states where masking in public, or at least in certain public settings, has been made

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[3] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/07/black-men-coronavirus-masks-safety
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/05/mexican-arrested-for-not-wearing-face-mask-later-found-dead
[5] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/brazils-super-rich-and-the-exclusive-club-at-the-heart-of-a-coronavirus-hotspot
[6] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/22/us-stores-against-face-masks
[7] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/countries-wearing-face-masks-compulsory-200423094510867.html

legally mandatory, the masking norm has the whole legal apparatus of the State underpinning it, even if actual enforcement of the norm by police and other authorities may be patchy or mostly non-existent. But legal enforcement confers at least some degree of moral authority to public masking, rendering any attempts by individuals not to obey the rules more likely to be subject to informal sanctions by other people, ranging from non-masked persons being openly avoided by others as they pass by, or being looked at with horror, as well as being met with various forms of negative verbal comment, which can be more or less nakedly hostile.

In situations where masking is legally obliged, wearing a mask is formally a mark of observing legality, as well as implicitly a sign of good citizenship. The act of not wearing a mask is the opposite of both these factors. We might expect the wearing of a mask over time to take on the characteristics identified by Foucauldian scholarship on governmentality (Rose et al 2006). First, as a form of self-control, whereby the person regulates, more consciously or more unreflectively, their own behaviour, in light of behaviours that certain authorities demand. Second, as a mode of "care of the self", whereby governmentality segues into an ethics of looking after both one's body and one's ontological security, through the acting of masking. Moreover, care of the self in turn melds into "care for others", if the masked person understands their practice in light of certain kinds of medical evidence that they may have been exposed to, either through official channels or more informally, to the effect that donning a mask is more about oneself not infecting others, rather than being protected from others. The latter case is a form of *mask-based citizenship practice*.

The situation is likely very different in places where masking is not legally enforced by governments, and is either only recommended by them, or is an issue they remain silent on, or is something they may even be publicly sceptical about or dismissive of. In these cases, it is at best unclear if I should wear a mask, and if so, when, where and in the presence of whom (only the obviously at-risk groups, especially the elderly, or everyone?). At worst, the mask wearer risks being the deviant, both as regards deviating from the norms of public discourse, and as regards their very physical presence in the streets. They are a lone – and lonely – masked figure among many other unmasked persons, open to various forms of attack from all sides. The mask-wearer wears a mask to feel safe, and perhaps also to make others feel secure too. But in a context where s/he is in the minority, s/he is paradoxically made vulnerable by the mask, the putative means of security. This is so both physically and socio-psychologically, for s/he is literally standing out from the crowd, in mostly unbidden and dysfunctional ways (Almila 2018). This is a scenario that Georg Simmel's (1969[1903]) analysis of the "lonely crowd" of cities can be easily adapted to encompass.

Simmel's (1964, 1972) sociology is also a useful resource for comprehending how masks both symbolize and enact the transformation of socio-spatial relations between dyads, triads, and larger groups of people. "Social distancing" has become the favoured English phrase for describing what in one way could more accurately be called "physical distancing". But in another way, the phrase "social distancing" is sociologically accurate, because the physical spaces between people are never purely physical, but are instead deeply socio-cultural in nature, existing as much in collective classifications, and therefore in individual minds, as they are in lengths between persons as measured in metres and centimetres. If a person observes a rule – which is simultaneously medical and governmental – of keeping at two metres' distance from others, then they do so because that distance has been defined as "cleanly", with any closer proximity to someone else being regarded as "dirty", risky, dangerous, and (literally)

polluting (and here Simmel may be combined with the classic analysis of Mary Douglas (1966)). The wearing of a mask dramatizes the spaces between persons. The semiotics of the Covid-19-averting mask communicate messages like *I am staying away from you, so keep at an appropriate distance from me too* (and this is Covid-19 masking's version of #MeToo). If the appropriate distance happens to be what medico-political authorities have defined as a minimum "safe" distance, then the wearing of a mask simultaneously encourages the practical maintenance of that distance in micro-interactions, while symbolizing to others the wearer's intentions regarding the desirability of such maintenance. The mask is pre-eminently a device aimed at the *re-engineering of space and spatial relations*. This is not a radically new mass phenomenon in many East Asian cities, but it is in other parts of the world. Sociology would do well to examine the unfolding transformations in such matters, drawing upon core sociological concepts, as well as resources from other areas, such as Henri Lefebvre's (1991[1974] influential account of spatial dialectics.

## Masks and Social Ambivalences: The Intertwining Cases of Masks and Veils

An increasingly obvious social paradox is that many countries which now legally impose public masking have legislation in place which bans or restricts religious face-veils, especially Muslim ones. France and Austria have banned face-veils in public places. Germany and Luxemburg have partial bans, and there are some local bans in Spain. Face-veiling has also been controversial in, among other places, Israel (Elor 2017). But the governments in all these countries enforce Covid-19-related masking in one way or another.

This paradoxical situation of simultaneously banning and enforcing the covering of the face has been noticed by many observers. Indeed, when announcing the enforcing of facemasks for Austria, the right-wing Chancellor Sebastian Kurz claimed that "masks are alien to our country".[8] In many places where face-covering is banned, masks may still be encouraged or at least presented as socially acceptable, unlike Muslim face-veils. Such is the situation, for example, in Quebec, where masks are "strongly recommended"[9], while face-veils remain banned. Yet some face-veil wearers across Europe and North America also report that they encounter less aggression and hostility now that masking has become a social norm, than they did before the pandemic period.[10]

Whether laws and regulations ban or demand face-covering, they are all *reactions* to something politically framed as a *problem*, either of public health or of supposed "public safety". Banning the covering of the face has a long history in the USA. Bans enforced by specific states were initially mostly put in place as a response to Ku Klux Klan hoods (Khan n.d., SPLC 1999). On the other hand, facemasks were first prescribed as a response to a pandemic during the period of the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918/19 (Tognotti 2003). In Europe, the earliest laws in the 1970s and 1980s targeting face-covering, such as in Italy and Germany, referred to any device that hindered facial identification. From the mid-1990s onwards, there was a wave of regulating face-covering during public demonstrations in some Nordic countries, following a wave of (masked) anarchist protests. A few months after the arrest of the Pussy Riot activists in 2012,

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the Russian government introduced anti-masking legislation. Only since 2010 has there been an international trend towards laws specifically targeting face-veiling Muslim women, first in France, and then elsewhere. While such laws have been upheld by European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), they have also been found by the United Nations disproportionately to affect the rights of Muslim women.[11]

In Europe and North America, the more general "problem" of face-covering pre-dates the more specific "problem" of face-veiling. The particularly controversial nature of the face-veil derives from the fact that it adds to the levels of perceived "threat" associated with face-covering in general, the presumed – and politically re-enforced and endlessly mediatised – "threat" of Islamic radicalization, which itself is often framed as a serious threat to national identity (e.g. Barker 2016, Moors 2009, Selby 2014). It is no accident that the French government's defence of its legislation in the ECtHR was that visibility of the face is essential to "living together". The argument made by the government in the period before the anti-face-veil laws came into effect was that the Republic "lives with an uncovered face".[12] Face-veiling is not only politically constructed as an undesirable activity in Europe and North America, but it is also communicated to be so through the nature of the built environment in those world regions. The very fabric of urban space itself makes visibility and transparency highly desirable ideological categories, against which the Muslim face-veil seems to clash, becoming "matter out of place" (Almila 2018).

Therefore, the social relations now operating between face-veils and Covid-19-related masks prompt three main questions for sociology, each of which leads to the other. The first concerns the question as to what happened to make facemasks desirable, and even mandated by law? These laws are reactions to a perceived threat. Covid-19 has seemingly transformed the individual face and its visibility to others, especially authority groups, from a source of safety to a source of alarm. An uncovered face is now a threat to the security of other people, whereas before it was a guarantor of security. The second question follows: what will happen to the nature of "transparent" public spaces if face-masking comes to be customary and normalised? Human bodies create spaces just as much as architecture and urban planning do (Lefebvre 1991[1974]). So, if those bodies are now facemask-wearing bodies, such a spatial practice will have profound effects on how spaces are perceived and used. But what will these effects turn out to be in the longer term? The third question is whether Islamic face-veils will continue to be regarded both by governments and general Western populations as unacceptable means of covering the face, in comparison to garments clearly identifiable as "masks"? This question is still very much an open one. This is especially so as there are already multiple styles of masks available to wear which go well beyond medical or medical-looking masks, with some being produced by established fashion brands, as noted by the influential Vogue fashion magazine, which is never slow to pick up and cultivate emerging cultural trends.[13] The initial experiences in the pandemic period of at least some face-veil wearers seem to be positive, in the sense that they seem now to "blend into the crowd" more readily, and therefore are less targeted for abuse. But a societal-level hypocrisy remains in place: it was already the case before the Covid-19 period that face-masks have in practice been allowed in locations where face-veils have been legally banned and/or socially shunned.

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[11] https://www.dw.com/en/french-burqa-ban-violates-human-rights-rules-un-committee/a-46007469
[12] https://www.dalloz-actualite.fr/flash/republique-se-vit-visage-decouvert-maintien-de-l-ordre-aussi#.XpP71kBFxPY
[13] https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/stylish-face-masks-to-shop-now

## Conclusion

Sociology must now seriously engage with all the various questions, topics and issues that have been outlined in this paper. A new sociology of masks and masking may be grounded in the established anthropological literature on masks, and then can branch out in novel directions. Such a sociology will track and analyse mask-related phenomena as they keep emerging, both during lockdown conditions and as these are lifted (or re-imposed). Masking matters are likely to become even more socially important than before, as the world struggles to emerge into a "post-Covid-19" scenario. This is because masking is crucial to that emergence – or at least some medical and governmental actors will wish to define reality in that way. In its ongoing bid to stay relevant, and to say things in ways that other disciplines and approaches do not or cannot, a central element in sociology's responses to pandemic and (putatively) post-pandemic times should be a focus on facial politics, as seen the gauze of the mask.

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