Outside Agitators
Calum Matheson

Recent headlines in the United States have described two simultaneous crises: COVID-19 and antiblack police murders. This formulation can be criticized on many grounds, not least because neither crisis is "new," both being repetitions of spectacle arising from persistent cultural formations. Still, there is something to be said for the comparison between COVID and police killings, and as usual, much *is* being said—much more than the speakers are aware of saying. This is particularly evident in right-wing discourse about the social disruptions of COVID and following demonstrations against police murder, whatever one labels them. Reactionaries whisper, say, and shout that outside agitators are responsible for both crises. This discourse is a commonality between disparate groups: smug survivalists with their canned food and ammunition boxes, bald-faced protestors against quarantine restrictions (also sometimes armed), and conspiracy theorists newly versed in the history of illness from the perspective of *Plandemic*.

China was an early fantasy. The spread of SARS-CoV-2 was first reported in Wuhan, and Americans were already primed by trade disputes, military fears, and economic scapegoating. The virus reinforced associations previously made in times of bubonic plague, leprosy, tuberculosis, and SARS—China is simultaneously backwards and a threat to the future. Asian-Americans—perpetual foreigners regardless of birth—have been spit upon in public places by those paradoxically fixated on hygiene. Traditional medicine, "exotic" foods, and biowarfare labs formed a heady mix of fantasy-confirming points of origin for COVID. People became metonyms for plague and peril. The virus and its social effects solidified fantasy related to outside threats, with additional layers of optional conspiracy targeting 5G towers, Jews, Russian disinformation, or any other symptomatic figure alone or in combination.

Subsequent lockdowns led eventually to protests. From my hometown of Lansing, Michigan, photos spread of doughy white guys with guns standing at the capitol building, demanding that this state, long sacrificed to global capital, be made ready again for the altar. Phallic guns have obvious links to the patriarchal aspects of these protests directed against Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The guns also fix the externality of the virus, as if it could be shot down like a conventional enemy—foreign or domestic—echoing the much-lampooned US Navy image of a submarine torpedoing it. Paradoxically, some of the same armed individualist conservatives who prepare with relish for social implosion now demand a return to normalcy in the society that they fantasize about abandoning. Armed militias in America also have a racist resonance dating back well before Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan, formed then also to maintain a particular structure of society. This acceptance of vigilantism does not extend, however, to antiracist protests, as the aftermath of George Floyd's death confirmed.

Racially-charged police violence is not new to Minneapolis, but Floyd's death was followed by action across the United States defined as demonstrations, riots, or rebellions depending on who is speaking not what was done (imagine the boy and girl at the train station of "Instance of the Letter" observing two signs, "Protest" and "Riot"). Race is a key symbol, but not the only one. Hammer and sickle graffiti, common in the Pittsburgh neighborhood adjacent to mine, suddenly appeared on a war memorial in the gentrified Bohemian-bourgeois neighborhood of Lawrenceville (Mario Lemieux's downtown statue received similar treatment). The (Democratic) mayor declared that "This is not Pittsburgh," asking "whoever did this" to "please leave." This message fits with one common in corporate news and conservative social media: violent protests are the result of outside agitation. As China is to COVID, so Antifa is to civil unrest (as long as a prohibition on explicit racism prevents simply blaming BLM).

"Outside" cannot be a definite place—there is no geographical border for COVID or Antifa, and if indeed every city's protestors have come from somewhere else, conservatives ought to add an unfamiliarity with the gameplay of musical chairs to their list of leftist crimes. The signifier of an outside serves to define in contrast an inside, a "place" where disorder could not possibly originate. The opposition is arbitrary and constantly sliding, as shown by the differences in discourse between armed anti-quarantine protests and mostly unarmed antiracist ones. The great irony of this formulation displays its essentially psychotic structure. The insistence that agitation must come from outside but one's genuine community values do not assumes that *any* signifier does not come from "outside"—the Other—when in fact they *all* do. Outside agitators and foreign vectors easily occupy the structural place of persecutors in paranoia and the insistence that all disturbance is external can be read as an attempt to preserve the fragile fantasy of a coherent self.

Space prohibits a comprehensive analysis of what might be foreclosed. Instead, I follow Lacan's advice in Seminar III to serve as a "secretary to the insane," mapping for now the logical structures of delusion prior to the more fundamental question of foreclosure. The dreamlike refusal of non-contradiction is evident in outside agitator delusions. For COVID, it is easy to find Internet discussions that assume simultaneously that the virus is a maliciously engineered Chinese biological weapon *and* that the threat is deliberately overblown for social control. In the case of protests, one finds coexisting claims that mass demonstrations cannot change anything *and* that they are threats to stability and liberal order. One finds right wing groups condemning demonstrations against agents of the state despite their armed presence throughout the Midwest protesting agents of the state.

I conclude with two brief overlapping implications. First, we as critics/analysts ought to rethink the role of media in the outside agitator discourse. Frequently those who circulate attacks on COVID scapegoats and antiracist protestors are "called out" on social media for "lying," refusing to acknowledge the "truth" of their social situation. But perhaps this is the wrong vocabulary. Some reactionaries—especially those *producing* this media content—may self-consciously manipulate information, but for many who

serve as *vectors* for it, conservative media is simply what they experience. It is thus closer to hallucination than deceit. Second, that acknowledgment ought to change how we respond. When severely psychotic patients hallucinate, it generally does little good to simply deny that their experiences to them. They are often certain about what they have perceived. Similarly, many conditioned by the discourses of the right cannot be influenced by simply denying their convictions with another set of equally certain "truths." The social discourse of psychosis is ultimately one of certainty. Those who see outside agitators behind the masks do not come to this conclusion after a careful consideration of evidence in a space of uncertainty. They do so precisely to develop a mechanism where evidence can be explained in advance. Preliminary to other (absolutely necessary) tasks, therefore, comes not a clash of certain truths against each other, but rather the introduction of uncertainty to those right-wing discourses. Ultimately, Schreber was not a poet because metaphor was absent for him. Racism among liberals, conservatives, radicals, normies, and everyone else is stupid, in both the prosaic and the Lacanian sense, but what if the identity of outside agitators was subject to metaphorical redeployment? What if Donald Trump, to whom his followers' lives are alien and foreign, was an outside agitator? What if the police in black neighborhoods, most of whom do not live where they patrol, were susceptible to this label? What if we resisted the certainty of an answer?

Calum Matheson is Assistant Professor of Public Deliberation and Civic Life at the University of Pittsburgh and a candidate at the Pittsburgh Psychoanalytic Center.