JEREMIAH MORELOCK (ORCID: 0000-0002-6506-4940)
YONATHAN LISTIK (ORCID: 0000-0002-4684-9611)
MILI KALIA

Why is Life Worth Saving? Neoliberalism, COVID-19, and Boris Johnson's Public Statements

We apply Brown's Foucauldian framework on neoliberalism to the COVID-19 crisis in the UK, and use qualitative content analysis to interpret the moral logics within 32 of Boris Johnson's public statements on COVID-19. We present the content analysis in six parts. For the first four parts, we apply four elements of Brown's framework: economization, governance, responsibilization, and sacrifice. Next, we explain two other moral logics— utilitarian and sympathetic. Johnson's condensation of logics contains ideological connotations: neoliberal rationality serves the mass of people and the purpose of sympathy. Within Brown's conceptual framework, the problem is not just the domination of the market, but the logic that grants the market legitimation as a human-centered logic. The adjustment we suggest is in recognizing the human-centered aspect as not a veneer for neoliberalism, but rather as a collection of disparate moral logics, combined with them smoothly on the surface, but messily underneath.

Keywords: neoliberalism, morality, COVID-19, Boris Johnson

> For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.
> (Foucault 1978, 143)

Introduction: Pandemic and Neoliberalism at Large

The COVID-19 crisis presents us with new global challenges. Societies are destabilized in profound and unexpected ways. People inside and outside the academy struggle to make sense of what is happening and its significance. Pre-pandemic social theories take on new connotations and require re-examination. From choosing to wear a mask and resolving on a personal regime of social distancing, to determining who gets a ventilator, to instituting lockdown and opening the economy, decisions that people consistently face are not just technical. They have an intrinsic, and sometimes very explicit, moral significance.

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While COVID-19 throws us into a radically different social configuration, it simultaneously maintains already established problematic patterns of neoliberal capitalism. On the one hand, lockdowns and social distancing limit our ability to circulate, consume and interact in close proximity. Such normative decisions and guidelines for dealing with the crisis seem to challenge or limit the hegemonic scope of neoliberal rationality. On the other hand, neoliberalism not only remains, but it is commonly framed as exemplifying a central rationality for responding to new challenges, and so its scope extends further.

In this article, we employ two linked strategies to assess this configuration: the articulation of a theoretical framework and its application in the form of qualitative content analysis. First, we explain our framework, and then apply it to empirical examples. In the first section, we explicate our theoretical framework for understanding the complex moral aspects of the discussion surrounding COVID-19. We suggest Wendy Brown's (2015; 2016) Foucauldian writings on neoliberalism, the state and economization have become strikingly relevant at this juncture. Brown's theory of neoliberalism is read here as critiquing a misleading appearance of harmonic normative duality (instrumental and human-centered) implicit in neoliberal rationality—she highlights immanent contradictory tensions within that rationality. Here, we will emphasize the latter, and focus in on the murky and unresolved combination of neoliberal values with two disparate moral logics, which we denote as utilitarian and sympathetic.

Wendy Brown roots her account of neoliberalism in Foucault's theory of neoliberalism as he specifically articulates it in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, so our account of neoliberalism sticks to this Foucauldian theory as well. After giving a brief historical introduction of neoliberalism (based on Foucault's description) and the moral logics of utilitarianism and sympathy, we explain our methodology for qualitative content analysis. In the second section, we apply this theoretical framework to the COVID-19 crisis in the UK. We show how Prime Minister Boris Johnson's statements surrounding COVID-19 often display a complex of disparate moral logics. They do not, for instance, fit a simple dichotomy of either prioritizing people or the economy. The UK government has both allowed private companies to handle a significant part of its response (e.g., staffing, providing COVID-19 secure work environments, travel to work, etc.), and implemented policies that extend state intervention into previously market-dominated and private spheres (leisure, care-work, etc.). Brown's theory of neoliberalism is central to our framework, but we also stretch her focus into two dissonant moral logics present within the case at hand. We present the content analysis in six parts. In the first four parts, we explain and apply four elements of Brown's theory: economization, governance, responsibilization, and sacrifice. Next, we explain the other two moral logics—utilitarianism and sympathy. We illustrate the themes from Brown's theory as well as utilitarian and sympathetic moral logics, in reference to quoted examples from our content analysis of 32 public announcements from Boris Johnson concerning COVID-19.

Theoretical Background

1. Foucault and Brown on Neoliberalism

In Foucault's (2008) framing in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, classical liberalism presupposes a natural condition that must be safeguarded against external intervention to allow the flourishing of life. This is the first sign of a biopolitical narrative. One could portray liberalism as a form of immunological administration of life—akin to a vaccination aimed to limit or weaken government/state intervention in everyday life, allowing the individual to optimally self-develop. In liberal ideals, governments should supply the bare minimum to ensure individuals can survive. Additionally, individuals are treated as autonomous and responsible agents. In other words, the political sphere prevents and is prevented from dominating the economy. Liberalism evolved into neoliberalism,

and it is in the American variety that Foucault sees the full expression of his conception of neoliberalism. The United States is not the exclusive location of the dynamics Foucault identifies in the American model, however, as this logic can be extended in other regions, as the British case demonstrates.

Neoliberalism dominates by folding the larger society into its logic, namely "the calculation—which, moreover, may be unreasonable, blind, or inadequate—through which one or more individuals decided to allot given scarce resources to this end rather than another" (Foucault 2008, 223). Notions such as free exchange, consensual interactions and agreements come to dominate the public sphere informed by this reasoning. This does not mean that all social relations are commercial, rather it means that the economy standardizes social interactions. For example, neoliberal subjects may often say that something is 'not marketable,' but they rarely ask why it would be in the first place. Under neoliberalism people become *homo œconomicus*, and orient themselves around the amassing of human capital, i.e., skills, assets, and connections that enhance their own 'marketability.'

Additionally, for Foucault (2008), liberalism involves the birth of a specific articulation of subjectivity—the individual agent becomes the central figure, politics merely concerned with guaranteeing individuals' autonomy. Under neoliberalism, subjects are 'invested' in themselves according to economic reasoning. In their pursuit of 'human capital' (ibid., chap. 9), subjects are expected to 'freely' harmonize their lives with neoliberal society. Foucault calls this mentality 'governmentality.' It is marked by the voluntary investment of the subject with society, and the concomitant process whereby government is colonized by economizing logic, 'governance.' Frictions and even distinctions dissolve between individual will, government policy, and workings of the economy. This structure does not refer to the conclusion one reaches after reflecting on politics, instead, the rationality under which the conclusion makes sense or even becomes inevitable. Business and government converge, and subjects need not be coerced to subjugate themselves—business, government, and subjectivity all run by the same rationality. As powerful as his theory of neoliberalism is, Foucault does not *concretely* engage with the negative ramifications of neoliberal rationality extending throughout society, nor does he explicitly comment on the dangers implicit in the liberal configuration.

This is taken up more by Wendy Brown (2015; 2016); hence, she is the main theoretical anchor here. She unfolds how this articulation serves specific economic interests by naturalizing the logic of capitalism.

Brown constructs the specific ramifications of Foucault's perception of the neoliberal subject. Where Foucault points to individualization, Brown points out that this new entity is fashioned as a private enterprise: "the self *is* an individual firm" (Brown 2016, 3). Brown explores the trap within this conception of self-made autonomy where, instead of the promised freedom, one is, in the long run, subjugated without any protection from a rigged and unfair game.

Brown (2015; 2016) presents a development to Foucault's original position in three ways. First, she adapts his discussion of 'biopolitical' logic to neoliberalism in a more concrete sense, demonstrating how the governing of life, implicit in neoliberal rationality, is not just metaphorical or conceptual—it has implications for politics and quality of life, such as exasperating poverty and wealth disparity. Neoliberalism directly affects the conditions of life and death. Brown strengthens the connection between biopolitics and neoliberalism, so there is no ambiguity regarding how neoliberalism is a politics of life and of letting die. With this clearer demarcation, her theory demonstrates a greater relevance for our purpose of assessing the COVID-19 crisis.

Second, Brown substantially explores the weakening of political life under neoliberalism. According to Brown, the impossibility of disputing neoliberal capitalism given its almost tautological engendering of economics as the underlying social principle, represents the impossibility of politics proper. This consensus is based on what Foucault described as limiting government interference on behalf of society. All interferences neutralized, social relations appear to result from free agreements between individuals. Thus, sociality is engendered as the result of tacit and common agreement. For Brown, this new dynamic represents an erasure of politics as a relevant framework of life. Politics is understood as the possibility of influencing common culture, not just as a dispute between technics of public administration. The neoliberal economy might seem open to any possibility under the guise of its 'marketplace of ideas,' but it cannot offer an idea that is not marketable. In other words, it never offers an escape from the market structure.

Third, although Brown most frequently cites Foucault's theory of neoliberalism as her primary influence, some of her ideas are dialectical. Foucault was not a dialectician (Mahon 1992; Cook 2018). Hence, Brown's description reaches outside of her Foucauldian influence. Particularly notable for us, Brown's ideas imply a dialectic of neoliberal rationality generating irrationality. While one could argue that Foucault's theory is suggestive of this and other dialectics (Grant 2010), the rationality/irrationality dialectic is treated explicitly by the early Frank-

furt School, particularly *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). For Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment rationality arose out of mythology, always contains mythological elements, and leads back to myth through several pathways. In the political sphere, this translates into the claim that liberal democracy tends to devolve into fascism. In terms of thought, it means that the instrumental rationality of late capitalism is both predicated on irrationality, and generative of irrationality. Like Foucault, the nexus where business and the state bleed into one another is central to Brown's description of neoliberalism. Yet she adds an emphasis on a neutralizing technical discourse that mystifies the dominating qualities of the integration between business and the state. For her, the crux of the rationality/irrationality dialectic is located in the nature of Foucauldian 'governance,' being a systemically integrated logic of control relying on 'governmentality,' i.e., the active engagement of the governed in their subjugation.

This is fundamental to the argument constructed here since it points at the presence of what will be denoted as 'governance speak,' where 'guidelines' replace law, 'facilitation' replaces regulation, 'standards' and 'codes of conduct' (disseminated by a range of agencies and institutions) replace overt policing and other forms of state coercion in the discussion over COVID-19. These replacements vanquish vocabulary of power, and hence power's visibility, from the lives and venues that governance organizes (Brown 2016, 5). Moreover, we notice that this governance speak exhibits instrumental rationality—instead of moral judgment, we have practical truth. Liquidated of any ostensible values other than neutral/technical ones that are thus incontestable, governance speak articulates a reality that ostensibly has nothing to do with power in the sense of direct oppression, but remains permeated by its trace. Governance is outside the orbit of control by persons, and in nobody's specialized interest—it comes from nowhere. It simply and incontrovertibly *is*. We would like here to highlight that this *is*-ness gives it an immense power, in that being naturalized and attached to nobody specific as its creator, it is identified with reality. It becomes omniscient, usurping the unassailable place of authority that God's will or a natural law—there is no ostensible force, entity, system, etc. There is only reality, and it is up to the individual to adapt.

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2. A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Utilitarianism, and Sympathy

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008) typifies the main characteristic of classical liberalism as the administration of administration: "It is the idea of society which permits the development of a technology of

government based on the principle that it is already in itself »too much«, »excessive«—or at least that it is added as a supplement whose necessity and usefulness can and must be questioned" (Foucault 2008, 319). He emphasizes the connection even in classical liberalism between conceptions of law and economy, noting that figures such as Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham were concerned with both areas. For us, it is also significant that they were both concerned with morality. In Bentham's utilitarianism (Mill and Bentham 1987), moral action is that which produces the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people. Adam Smith's (1791) famous economic metaphor of an 'invisible hand' could be argued to fit well enough with Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism—if everyone pursues their own self-interest, then economic benefits will extend throughout the population. The combined logic of Smith's economics and Bentham's utilitarianism is that self-interested acts in the economic sphere are moral acts, because they will benefit the larger population. Effectively, acting in self-interest is the best way to serve the collective. Yet Smith was not a utilitarian (Hanley 2009; Witztum and Young 2013). 'Moral sentiments' for him were rooted in the experience of 'sympathy,' rather than in utilitarian calculation (Smith [1822] 2010). This is a view of morality as deriving intuitively *from the individual*, albeit in intrinsic relation to society. Smith's notion of the deep connection between morality and sympathy points toward the association of morality with a caring impulse rather than obeyed edict as we will develop later in our assessment of the case of Boris Johnson's COVID-19 statements.

In this manner, we will demonstrate how neoliberal rationality contains its own moral dimension, despite its participation in stripping moral qualities from capitalist society. In a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, many decisions must be made, based on different calculations, on all levels of society. And despite the garb of instrumentality, the calculations they consult are rooted in moral valuations. For example, consider the exclusion of infected seniors from intensive care due to their lower chances of survival and a scarcity of hospital beds. The argument in favor of this, based on supplies and probabilities, derives from a deeper utilitarian moral schema about ensuring the greatest good for the greatest number. This utilitarian calculation can easily become a kind of inhumane biopolitics, when by definition, the actual individual human experience of suffering and loss is not factored into the calculus unless consolidated and quantified with the suffering of others. The implicit commitment to utilitarian morality demands that, in public health crisis, there will be many situations where the calculus dictates that a life

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is not worth saving.

Yet, as we will show, even in a neoliberal politician's statements, sympathy tends to be invoked—just associated in an unarticulated fashion with utilitarianism and neoliberalism, giving the illusion of a simple, coherent formula when, in actuality, we will argue that multiple logics operate simultaneously within the same texts. We suggest that the texts should be understood to be morally ambivalent and at times self-contradictory.

Methodology

In this article, we use qualitative content analysis to interrogate Boris Johnson's public statements from March 9 through December 2, 2020. Our approach shares some commonalities with sociologist Brian Lowe's theory of "moral vocabularies" as well as the approaches to critical discourse analysis (CDA) outlined by Fairclough, and Reisigl and Wodak. We should not overstate these comparisons, as our approach is not rooted in them; there are some points of agreement between our qualitative content analysis approach, and the referenced approaches, and some similar preoccupations with them, but we are not following a moral vocabularies approach or CDA. A rigorous elaboration of the differences in our approach here as compared with the approaches of Lowe, Fairclough, Reisigl and Wodak is beyond scope of this article, but we nevertheless wish to contextualize our approach by briefly juxtaposing it with these other frameworks, highlighting the specific/punctual additions such frameworks can provide to our overarching assessment. We will briefly explain some points of concord with those approaches, to help illustrate some dimensions and inflections of our qualitative content analysis.

Lowe defines a moral vocabulary as "a form or ethos of moral reasoning which includes particular symbols, signs, code words, forms of argumentation and other moral resources" (Lowe 2006, 2010). His approach is directed toward identifying the "moral resources" that moralising claimsmakers utilize when operating within a given vocabulary, and in understanding the role of moral vocabularies in their wider social contexts. Essentially, Lowe's approach is geared toward unpacking the 'toolkits' of moral claimsmakers and showing how such toolkits are employed. We value the framework created by the concept of 'moral vocabulary,' but Lowe's analyses focus on the arguments and rhetoric that come from social groups explicitly promoting their particular posi-

tions, movements, campaigns, etc. We are interested more in identifying the implicit moral reasoning that may be uncovered within statements that cannot so easily be assigned to an explicit position or agenda. In other words, instead of investigating the language employed by neoliberals to argue for deregulation, for example, we would be more interested in investigating the genre(s) of language employed about deregulation by persons when they are *not* ostensibly arguing from a definite stance on the economy, neoliberal or otherwise. By doing this, we might uncover neoliberal presuppositions in their language, or unwitting employment of language that Lowe might identify as belonging to the 'toolkits' of neoliberals. We want to dig down to a more implicit level of meaning, which is addressed more in critical approaches to discourse analysis.

Fairclough's CDA (critical discourse analysis) is strongly influenced by the Foucauldian concept of discourse (Foucault 1972; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Gutting 1989). Fairclough explains: "The analysis of discourse for Foucault is (…) a matter of discerning the rules which 'govern' bodies of texts and utterances" (Fairclough 2003, 124). Fairclough's particular take on discourses is that they are different perspectives, shaped by people's identities and social relationships. They embody representations of the world, and possibilities and hopes for how the world could be changed. In this sense, Fairclough claims that there are political and moral dimensions of discourses. He also notes that discourses exist in various relationships; "they may complement one another, compete with one another, one can dominate others, and so forth" (ibid., 124). We are not interested in the subject positions and social inequalities implicated by the language of the text. Instead, we look to pull apart the complex of connotated inner moral logics that may contradict one another, despite the simpler appearance of meaning on the surface of statements, for instance on the level of denotation. In this sense—uncovering contradictory or dissonant logics beneath appearance—our method overlaps with what Reisigl and Wodak have called "text or discourse immanent critique," which is one of three tiers in the "discourse-historical approach" (Reisigl and Wodak 2016; Forchtner 2011). In these ways—taking influence from Foucault's concept of discourse and from immanent critique—our approach overlaps broadly with aspects of some approaches to CDA.

Yet 'discourse analysis' proper refers to specific traditions of linguistic analysis that we do not practice here. To avoid confusion over this issue, we avoid the use of the term 'discourse' in our own analysis, and instead employ the broader term 'logic.' In the sociology of organizations, a par-

ticular use of the concept of 'logics' is found in the notion of 'institutional logics,' where normatively-binding ways of reasoning are rooted in specific social institutions such as the family, the economy, the state, etc. (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999; 2008). Scholars have also specifically applied this concept in studying 'competing institutional logics' within organizational settings (Reay and Hinings 2009; Pache and Santos 2013). Here again, our focus overlaps but does not fall within the purview. We are not focused on how 'competing' logics interface within particular organizations so much as how they are buried within a particular individual's language; and we are not concerned with logics as indicative of specific social institutions so much as with the internal nature of the logics themselves. As discussed earlier, neoliberal subjectivity, in Foucault's sense, extends well beyond any particular institution in the contemporary period. Our treatment of utilitarianism and sympathy is similarly focused purely on the nature of reasoning, not claiming it as intrinsically derived from any particular social institution.

Considering the above, we are interested in the dimension of taken-for-granted moral logics that operate as background assumptions to the text (the *ought*), and are occasionally connotated by choices of phrase. Within this dimension, multiple moral logics in various relations can be implicit within the same texts. Focusing on the issue of normativity, we are interested in implied moral logics. In this sense, we aim to uncover the copresence of divergent moral logics within the text; and how these logics, in relation to one another, contain divergent moral presuppositions that are implicated in the text, whether or not they are stated directly.

Several recent scholars have critically analyzed Johnson's language. Their findings have included implicit sexism (Sunderland 2020) and manipulation in his language on Brexit (Kadhim and Jawad 2020). It has been argued that Johnson frequently employs metaphorical language specifically animated by moral implications (Charteris-Black 2019). Others have conducted discourse analysis of a variety of sources and texts dealing with COVID-19, including from Twitter (Wicke and Bolognesi 2020), popular media (Mohammed et al. 2021), and the speeches of Chinese President Xi Jinping (Jinshuang and Rong 2020). Other recent studies investigate moral motivations and understandings of various populations dealing with COVID-19 (Kim and Chung 2021; Qian and Yahara 2020). We intend for this article to contribute to these bodies of work; the one collection of studies concerning the implicit logics—moral and otherwise—in Boris Johnson's language, and the

other collection concerning the implicit language—moral and otherwis—in discussions surrounding COVID-19. We bring these two areas of focus together in this article.

Application: COVID-19 and Boris Johnson's Moral Logics

Below, we present the outcome of our qualitative content analysis of Boris Johnson's moral logics in his public statements on COVID-19 spoken at the Prime Minister's Office or the House of Commons from March 9th through December 2nd, 2020, retrieved from websites: gov.uk, wired-gov.com, and rev.com. Our analysis is focused on the presence of four families of cues in the texts that we argue signify respectively three different normatively-weighted logics: neoliberal, utilitarian, and sympathetic.

We begin with the *neoliberal logic*, which concerns the moralizing aspects and stylistics pointed out in Brown's analysis. In other words, we trace the employment of elements such as: economistic language, 'governance speak,' citizens identified as individuals responsible for the well-being of society, and the encouragement of sacrifice in service of this purpose. This neoliberal logic, as mentioned above, is taken from Brown's analysis and her categories. We structure the presentation sequentially around Brown's concepts (economization, governance, responsibilization, and sacrifice). For each concept, we combine a brief theoretical explanation with examples taken from Johnson's COVID-19 statements. We then proceed to the two human-centered moral logics: utilitarianism and sympathy.

1. Economization

The "study of economization involves investigating the processes through which activities, behaviors and spheres/fields are established as being economic (whether or not there is consensus about the content of such qualifications)" (Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 370). Building on the argument of Çalışkan and Callon, Brown unpacks a specific mode of economization that underwrites and informs austerity politics. Çalışkan and Callon defend a theoretical shift away from studying the economy as a pre-existing, distinct, social sphere of activity to something that evolves. Overall, economization incessantly focuses on contextualized processes and practices of disembedding and re-embedding, material, and non-material assemblages. Brown's analysis of austerity politics lays bare complexities and contradictions of neoliberal econo-

mization as a permutation in rationality that corrupt our understanding of wellbeing.

For Brown, neoliberal economization does not allow the utilitarian notion that individuals make decisions around their pleasure or pain. Instead, the neoliberal subject is produced within discursive space between state and capitalist processes through the *seemingly* coherent logic of human capital which produces dis-embedded (vs. free), isolated (vs. autonomous), governable (vs. politically engaged) and dispensable (vs. valuable) subjects. Brown notes, "conversion of the worker, the consumer, the activist citizen—all entities capable of linking together into a social force—into isolated bits of self-investing human capital both makes them more governable and integrates them into a project: economic growth, to which they may potentially be sacrificed." (Brown 2016, 8).

The naturalization of economic processes can be seen in the general way 'the economy' is discussed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions concerning what will happen to this or that industry are posed in a manner similar to weather patterns where downturns are predicted that will throw millions of people out of work. The pure neoliberal response to the problem of unemployment and recession is that the economy must be 'reopened' to allow all the gears to keep turning, leaving to society the imperative to absorb whatever patterns result from such operations. Like the 'invisible hand' of the market, the disease is best allowed freedom of movement. Letting COVID-19 run its course will result in 'herd immunity.'

As an expression of 'formal rationality,' neoliberalism is ostensibly amoral. Yet, in neoliberal society, heeding the incontrovertible laws of reality with an eye toward personal 'success' is provided a moral color. Without other qualifiers, means-ends rationality implies a bias toward obeying the laws of the market and making wise personal choices in relation to them. If a person neglects to conform to these requirements, this is a failure worthy of moral condemnation, not because somebody else was hurt, but simply because the nonconformist has failed to live according to the dictates of neoliberal rationality.

There are two ways that economization was evident in Johnson's language: in statements about helping the economy and in statements discussing sickness and suffering through instrumental abstractions and metrics. Regarding the first (helping the economy), on March 18, Johnson said "there will of course be far fewer children in schools and that will help us to slow the spread of the disease. And these measures are crucial to make sure the critical parts of the economy keep functioning."

Here, his logic is economizing in that he discusses the quantity of children and its instrumental relation to the spread of disease, and most tellingly, he explains this is crucial because of the economy, which is implied to be of preeminent importance to disease transmission and to children's education.

On March 19, Johnson emphasized "we're asking such a huge amount (…) we're asking people not to socialize in the normal way and already we can see the impact that this is having on the UK economy and on business, on great, great companies." Like children's schooling in the quote before, here he again discusses a very human-centered issue, being people's way of participating in social life; and again, he turns to the relationship of this to the economy as the determining rationality guiding his posture. On July 3, he said: "As lockdown eases, we should focus on supporting the livelihoods of business owners and their employees up and down the country—all of whom are opening their doors for the first time in more than three months." Here, his emphasis is on supporting business owners and their employees first and foremost, which implies viewing them in their roles as members of economic society—and in the word 'livelihoods,' he reveals that he is concerned foremost with their financial well-being, again translating their role as citizens to their role as economic agents. Regarding the second (sickness and suffering), statements like the following were common. "And while the number of people dying with coronavirus remains too high, the numbers do continue to fall" (July 3). "[T]he data is improving—with the percentage of people testing positive falling from a weekly rate of 12.2% on 29 June to 4.8% yesterday" (July 17). "[T]here will be a clear incentive for everyone in areas where the virus prevalence is high to get a test, to get one of these rapid turnaround lateral flow tests" (November 23). The abstract and quantitative language, even when discussing death, mark the naturalized economic logic, even if the economy is not directly mentioned in his statement. Besides the abstractions and calculations, the term 'incentive' harkens to economistic language about human motivation.

2. Governance

Governance is Brown's concept to denote the replacement of politics by management. In that way, governance substitutes government as the central political concept. The political disappears since it is reduced to issues of technical management of society rather than profound questions regarding common life. Following economization, the sole responsibility of the political is to foment the economy. This logic is supported by

a deeper conception of society as a free space of exchanges and autonomous individuals.

Such an idea can only emerge from undisputed presence of principles of administration in politics. That is, the complete replacement of political dispute by technical and market-oriented administration (Brown 2016, 6). Brown points out that what is presented as a positive move towards a less bureaucratic mechanism is in turn a move towards autonomy that simultaneously binds this new structure of individuality to a system of its administration. Since everyone is a common stakeholder of the current configuration, there is no political dispute. More specifically, this means that social conflict is reduced to the negotiation of practice guidelines, objectively determined by the technical knowledge of experts.

This is an essential aspect of our understanding of the responses to the COVID-19 crisis since it aids in understanding the logic behind the government's economizing insistence on saving the market. It emerges from the idea that by saving the market, one is saving society. The best practices principle underlying governance dictates that government should behave as a company would: strategically minimizing its intervention to achieve what is perceived as the best possible outcome. In other words, government no longer acts politically in the sense of having an overarching responsibility towards all citizens; it acts technically. The underlying narrative is that the problems brought about by the crisis have no connection to political issues. In fact, the technical government no longer deals with "political" issues. Its role is merely to safeguard individuality and ensure the market can naturally resolve any crisis that might emerge.

According to Brown, governance is the ubiquity of administrative terms such as 'best practice' in political discourse. In the context of the COVID crisis in the UK, the constant use of vague and imperative language such as 'keep your distance,' 'stay alert,' 'protect your communities' and 'control the virus' is symbolic of this logic. Often it comes down to generalized best practices and individual decisions, where government responses come closer to providing overarching advice rather than clear-cut directives. "A huge public information campaign is being rolled out, so people get all the information they need to protect themselves and others" (March 18). "Instead of government telling people to work from home, we are going to give employers more discretion, and ask them to make decisions about how their staff can work safely. That could mean of course continuing to work from home (…). Or it could mean making workplaces safe by following COVID-secure guide-

lines." (July 17). Most often, Johnson's presentation followed this pattern of giving advice and guidelines and presenting them as objectively determined by expert opinion: "[I]t's absolutely critical in managing the spread of this virus that we take the right decisions at the right time, based on the latest and best evidence." (March 9). "We are going to be driven by the science, the data and public health." (May 10)

Stretching the nature of governance, Johnson frequently included the caveat that if people did not voluntarily follow guidelines, infection rates would rise, and he would then have to enforce the guidelines or stricter ones: "And I have to warn you, there will be further local outbreaks. So, we will monitor carefully, we will put on the brakes as required, and where necessary, we will re-impose measures. It's important to be clear about that up front" (May 28). "And I must tell you that if the virus were to begin to run out of control, I will not hesitate to put on the handbrake on and reverse some of these changes, at a local or indeed national level as required. But we can avoid that if we all continue to stay alert and do our bit to control the virus" (June 23). Johnson's logic is that he should ideally govern as little as possible even when facing a crisis such as a global pandemic.

3. Responsibilization

'Responsibilization' is the tendency for individuals to be ascribed the agency that renders them blameworthy or commendable for their own situations as well as the state of the nation. The context within which the individual operates is naturalized and unproblematized as the essential political sphere—self-interested and independent individuals become the unit of politics. The concrete social conditions, and even moreso, the material conditions, that frame the position of the individual are no longer articulated as a political issue. Still, this emancipation is invariably an abandonment of the social subject to their own resources as this new configuration of agency is exclusively engendered in economized self-valorization. With the invisibility of the "social" as a legitimate domain of intervention, the status quo gains a kind of quasi-religious authority and is raised to the level of a self-evident moral injunction for the individual to adapt effectively to. Brown notes that typically the individuals with the least power are held most responsible. This is an extension of neoliberal rationality in the sense that the individual is saddled with both freedom and responsibility to determine their own fate and that of the collective.

In the case of COVID-19, responsibilization can be seen both in the language around protective measures such as mask wearing and social

distancing as well as in the push to reopen the economy as fast and completely as possible. Regarding protective measures, the narrative is that what individuals choose to do determines not only their own fate but also the fate of others: "Our principle is to trust the British public to use their common sense in the full knowledge of the risks (…). [W]e will continue to trust in the common sense and the community spirit of the British people to follow this guidance" (June 23). "[W]e must rely on our willingness to look out for each other, to protect each other. Never in our history has our collective destiny and our collective health depended so completely on our individual behaviour" (September 22). The individual remains responsible for the actions that will determine their own financial and medical well-being. "But the success of these businesses, the livelihoods of those who rely on them, and ultimately *the economic health of the whole country is dependent on every single one of us acting responsibly*. We must not let them down" (July 3; emphasis added.). The notion that 'the economy' has 'health' transfers the notion of sentience and necessity onto economic processes, which can only be helped by the 'responsible' actions of every individual person.

4. Sacrifice

Under neoliberalism, the market is transformed into an almighty and amorphic entity that demands constant subjugation via the subject's total investment into the system without any promise of return. Brown argues that this continuous submission to the market becomes the overarching element of neoliberal subjectivity. While the market demands total dedication, it offers no guarantee. Individuals are responsible for ensuring the satisfaction of the market while the market is not accountable for anything. Brown mentions the example of periods of economic crisis when individuals are expected to endure all the consequences of instability without any guarantee of compensation in periods of recuperation: "Through this bundling of agency and blame, individuals are doubly responsibilized: they are expected to fend for themselves (and blamed for their failure to thrive) and for the well-being of the economy (and blamed for its failure to thrive)." (2016: 8)

Sacrifice is the culmination of all Brown's other factors (economization, governance, and responsibilization). It is the most dramatic expression of the neoliberal agent. The COVID-19 context stretches—but does not break—Brown's logic. The issue is that sacrifice can take one of two forms: a) not going to work to limit the spread of the virus,[1]

1 To some extent, protective measures such as mask wearing and social distan-

despite the risk to your own material well-being, or b) going to work, despite the risk to your own health. Either course—working or not working—can be framed as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good. In the case of working, it might be framed as helping get people what they need, and/or as helping 'the economy' run. Here, the market only (but not always) figures in (b), so the logic of sacrifice extends here beyond just the market, into the broadly defined well-being of the mass.

During COVID-19, this was emblematic on several fronts. The first and most emblematic was the treatment of nurses and other medical and educational staff who were constantly referred to as heroes for their sacrifice (Mohammed et al. 2021). The logic behind this narrative is that professionals were expected to put themselves at risk on behalf of the social good. Despite the spectacle of reverence, they were not compensated or supported in any other manner than symbolic commemoration, such as being given medals (BBC, July 2, 2020). Some would say that the 'hero' designation may also have functioned at cross-purposes with rectifying the lack of proper protective gear for medical staff (Higgins, 2020). This principle is extended to the general population as well. Rather than the government being accountable for a sequence of poorly managed and executed decisions that continuously create confusion, the 'poorly' behaved individuals who insist on breaking a lockdown that was never fully imposed become the ultimate culprits. This last point completes the circle of sacrifice since it legitimizes the sacrifice even of those who do not 'voluntarily' offer themselves. If the individual is the locus of responsibility, then the victims of COVID-19 become sacrificial, given their 'failure to thrive', in this case by not adhering to self-care guidelines.

Johnson's language of sacrifice primarily focuses on the general population: "I want to thank families for their sacrifice at this difficult time" (March 18). "Bit by bit, day by day, by your actions, your restraint and your sacrifice, we are putting this country in a better and stronger position" (March 20). "[I]t is thanks to your effort and sacrifice in stopping the spread of this disease that the death rate is coming down and hospital admissions are coming down" (May 10). "[T]he public have responded magnificently and selflessly. Putting their lives on hold, bearing any burden, overcoming every obstacle and tolerating every disruption and inconvenience no matter how large or small or inconsistent" (November 4). He uses the notion of sacrifice to honor the general mass he hails

cing can be viewed as sacrificial, but they do not generally carry with them the same gravity as unemployment or risking infection.

through his words. But more than this, he suggests that it is the collection of individual sacrifices that has been central in mitigating the pandemic. The logic is directly tied to responsibilization, as in Brown's formulation. It is the individual citizen who is deemed responsible for the country's successes in the face of the crisis, through their willingness to sacrifice for the good of the whole. Politics and government disappear into the backstage.

5. Other Moral Logics: Utilitarianism and Sympathy

Utilitarianism—the calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number—is indicated in statements that honor behaviors which benefit large numbers of people. In this, it conceptually overlaps considerably with economization, with the difference that utilitarianism is always an explicitly moral logic—it involves a sense of *ought*—whereas economization is only indirectly normative, in senses explained above. Economization is a key theme within the neoliberal logic, but on its own, it is not properly a moral logic. In the following examples of the utilitarian logic, the presence of factors beyond pure economism becomes evident. On March 16, Johnson mentioned that he wanted to "reduce the peak, to save life, minimize suffering." On July 3, he said: "Without doubt, lockdown has saved many hundreds of thousands of lives—but it has also had a devastating impact on our way of life and our economy (…). Our goal remains to enable as many people as possible to live their lives as close to normally as possible—in a way which is as fair and as safe as possible." From July 17: "When we set out our plan to rebuild on 11 May, we said our goal was to return life to as close to normal as possible, for as many people as possible, as fast and as fairly as possible, in a way that is safe and continues to protect our NHS. That goal remains the same." Even though the logic of these statements is marked by an economy of life, it cannot be reduced to the pure economism that Brown describes. Utilitarian moral logic is evident in the reference to life having a value in itself rather than merely having an instrumental or calculative character. The value associated to quality of life, for instance, is a factor directing the outcome of the overarching calculation.

Sympathy involves articulations of emotion experienced regarding the suffering of others, or "close up" or "personal" articulations of human suffering that might be expected to evoke emotion in the listener: "There have now been four deaths from coronavirus in the UK, and our deepest sympathies are obviously with their friends and families" (March 9). "Of those who have tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, it saddens me to report that 42,927 have now died" (June 23). Johnson

frequently mentioned being "sad" about lives lost. On May 28, he said, "I know the toll that lockdown has taken on families and friends who have been unable to see each other." On June 10, he lamented "more families in mourning." On November 26, he appealed to the sympathetic dimension when he mentioned positive developments with a vaccine, which could help the people of the country "reclaim our lives and all the things that we love."

While sympathy was commonly present, it was not typically expressed in reference to helpful behavioral or political responses to the pandemic so much as an aside. Emotions were narrated and spoken about with care, but they were not mobilizing forces or rationales for actions taken. The more common rationales were along the lines described by Brown in reference to "governance"—the sense of scientific necessity, the plea to citizens to be responsible, lest the government need to resort to greater measures of enforcement. Still, this turn to an intra-personal and intimate approach to what is a political concern reverberates the categories explored earlier. Even though Brown makes no reference to the emotional elements of the neoliberal configuration, we find, in the sympathy logic highlighted above, a turn to the individual as the unit of politics that is consistent with Brown's account. In plain words, the fact that the PM responds as an individual rather than under his political role is emblematic here.

Conclusion

We have argued that the public statements on COVID-19 from UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson can be read to embody at least three distinct moral logics simultaneously: neoliberal, utilitarian, and sympathetic. Our analysis in this article does not intend to comment on state interventions or lack thereof. It is simply to point out that Johnson's public statements about the crisis indicate a murky mixture of these various logics and themes. The argument presented here diverges from optimistic approaches who see in COVID-19 a breaking point of capitalist logic and, therefore, an historically specific opportunity for the construction of an alternative society, and it also diverges from pessimistic approaches that argue the logic of capital remains totalizing. We argue that none of these logics should be read as a single true underlying motivator, the others as ruses or misinterpretations. Instead, we argue that all the logics are combined within these texts.

A key insight Brown offers is that neoliberalism conflates the dichotomy between humanism and economy into a logic that reveals itself to be simultaneously inhumane and humane. In the categories explored, Brown demonstrates that the neoliberal logic allows for a political regime that uses empowerment to dismiss any responsibility over the well-being of its citizens and, therefore, employs it in a manner that legitimizes its abandonment of the social sphere to an almost unmediated market logic. We suggest that her assessment is sound, yet some more specifically targeted analysis of the dissonances, contradictions, and relations between disparate moral logics within the text might also be informative. In reference to Brown's theory, it is not entirely clear how one should read the relationship between neoliberal rationality and other moral logics—e.g., allusions to sympathy or to utilitarian calculations—that at least on the surface clash with her core concepts—e.g., economization, governance, responsibilization, and sacrifice.

Even assuming the clashing moral logics are not intended as a form of mystification, their earnest yet murky assemblage serves an ideological function, granting neoliberal rationality a greater rhetorical base and moral legitimation. This is how neoliberal rationality can be insidious and all powerful.

In the examples explored, we suggested that the ambivalent moral reasoning expressed should not be rashly interpreted as indicative of dishonesty, as in the sense that Johnson pretended to care or used moral language purely for rhetorical purposes; it is less presumptive to just point out that he expresses a condensation of disparate moral logics. When collapsed together and not articulated as a condensation—which is perhaps more likely to be the way they are typically experienced by speaker and listener, in this case, Johnson and the citizenry—an implication is generated that neoliberal rationality is the way to serve the mass, and because serving the mass is the height of sympathy, in continuing to fulfil our duties as neoliberal subjects we serve the purpose of sympathy. In this way, even assuming the clashing moral logics are not intended as a form of mystification, their earnest yet murky assemblage serves an ideological function, granting neoliberal rationality a greater rhetorical base and moral legitimation. This is how neoliberal rationality can be insidious and all powerful.

The mixture of logics that we interpreted in Johnson's COVID-19 statements should by no means be assumed to be the dominant mixture throughout the UK, much less the rest of the world. Yet, it is plausible that such a mixture might be found among other prominent politicians in other locations and even perhaps within other arenas such as in the narratives of popular news reporting or how organizations respond to the crisis. Our approach of qualitative content analysis here might be extended to other such arenas. In this sense, the aim of this article is neither to provide a definite frame for structuring logics nor is it to point at contingent and specific elements in its case. Instead, the difficulties

and ambivalences highlighted, intend to point at tensions deserving of further investigation. The entangled dynamics between logics are fundamental to the overarching argument since they block the formation of any stable and identifiable account of the issues.

Ultimately, our purpose in centering our account on Brown's conceptual framework is to highlight the self-evidence of certain logics as thought-provoking. We mean neither to dismiss nor uphold them in their entirety. Our argument is that the problem is not just the domination of the market, but the logic that grants the market legitimation as a human-centered logic. Within Johnson's statements, we focused on the latter aspect by sketching moral logics of sympathy and utilitarianism that stretch Brown's original frame. The adjustment we suggest is to recognize the human-centered aspect as not a veneer for neoliberalism or antithetical to a neoliberal agenda, but rather as a collection of disparate moral logics, combined with them smoothly on the surface, but messily underneath. As in the assessment of the logics of Johnson's narrative, one finds that a conflation of neoliberalism and human-centered morality complexifies the political scenario.

Our argument is that the problem is not just the domination of the market, but the logic that grants the market legitimation as a human-centered logic.

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JEREMIAH MORELOCK, Ph.D. – is a postdoctoral researcher and the project coordinator of the Taking Care of Us study at the William F. Connell School of Nursing at Boston College. He also teaches sociology at Boston College's Woods College of Advancing Studies and directs the Research Network on Dialectics & Society. He is the author of *Pandemics, Authoritarian Populism, and Science Fiction* (Routledge, 2021), and co-author (with Felipe Ziotti Narita) of *The Society of the Selfie* (University of Westminster Press, 2021) and *O Problema do Populismo* (UNESP, Paco Press, 2019).

Address:
Boston College
Department of Sociology
426 McGuinn Hall
140 Commonwealth Ave
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467
(617) 552-4130
email: morelocj@bc.edu

YONATHAN LISTIK – is PhD candidate from the University of Amsterdam working on political theory from a continental perspective. He works on the entanglement between democracy, stupidity and power.

Address:
Oude Turfmarkt 143
Postbus 94201
1090 GE Amsterdam – Netherlands
email: y.listik@uva.nl

MILI KALIA – works for the Oxford City Council and owns a Sociology tutoring business. She has completed her master's degree from Oxford University and has trained as a doctoral student in the US. Her research, academic, and work interests/passions lie at the intersection of everyday legality and economic processes—more specifically, how market-based practices and rationality engage and confront temporary migrant legality assemblages.

Address:
Oxford City Council
Town Hall, St Aldate's, Oxford, OX1 1BX – England
email: littlemili1@gmail.com

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Autorzy: Jeremiah Morelock, Yonathan Listik, Mili Kalia

Tytuł: Dlaczego warto ratować życie? Neoliberalizm, COVID-19 i publiczne wypowiedzi Borisa Johnsona

Abstrakt: W przedstawionym artykule stosujemy wypracowaną przez Browna Foucaultowską perspektywę ujęcia neoliberalizmu po to, by przyjrzeć się związanemu z pandemią COVID-19 kryzysowi w Zjednoczonym Królestwie. Używając jakościowej analizy treści, staramy się odsłonić moralną logikę stojącą za 32 publicznymi wypowiedziami Borisa Johnsona na temat COVID-19. Podzieliliśmy naszą analizę na sześć części. W pierwszych czterech częściach wykorzystujemy cztery kategorie wskazane przez Browna: ekonomizację, rządzenie, czynienie odpowiedzialnym i poświęcenie. Następnie objaśniamy dwie inne logiki moralne – utylitarystyczną i współczującą. Połączenie tych logik przez Johnsona niesie ideologiczny przekaz o następującej treści: neoliberalna racjonalność służy ludziom i ich wspiera. W ramach perspektywy Browna problemem jest nie tylko dominacja rynku, lecz także legitymizowanie rynku jako logiki skoncentrowanej na człowieku. Proponowane przez nas uzupełnienie polega na rozpoznaniu faktu, że owa skoncentrowana na człowieku logika nie jest pokostem neoliberalizmu, ale raczej zestawem niespójnych logik moralnych, spojonym jedynie na powierzchni, ale wewnątrz wciąż rozproszonym.

Słowa kluczowe: neoliberalizm, moralność, COVID-19, Boris Johnson