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Corona-Masquerade, or: Unmasking the New Sociology of Masks

Corona-Masquerade: It sounds like the name of a comic opera. But large parts of the population of the world have very recently donned, or are being compelled to wear, face masks, in response to the rapid spread of Covid-19. Masks have fast become ever more subject to various kinds of politicised dispute and controversy. Consequently, the masquerade surrounding Coronavirus has become a deadly serious globalized phenomenon, truly a matter of life and death.

Sociology has not had a great deal to say about masks and masking, at least in comparison to anthropology, where these inter-related topics have for a long time been a major topic. Sociology has often dealt with masks more as metaphor than concrete objects. Both everyday talk and Goffmanian sociology deal with issues to do someone's face being 'like a mask'. The use of masks as 'stage props' by actors like doctors and dentists is another obvious Goffmanian focus. But anthropology has more systematically dealt with actual masks, in terms of what they look like, and what types of work they have been and are put to, in diverse societies around the world, at different historical periods.

There is probably a Western bias in sociology's relative lack of interest in masking. The historical/anthropological record shows that masks and masking have been present in most, if not all, human societies. Manipulating the human face by masks, whether to hide it wholly or partly, or alternatively to draw attention to it, seems to have been very widespread throughout much of human history. Many societies around the world have maintained masking traditions up until the present time, albeit inflected many ways by modernizing and globalizing dynamics. But in the West, masks and masking have undergone long-term processes of sequestration, moving them from the centre of social life into specific, regulated pockets, often commodifying and trivializing them on the way. In the contemporary West, masks are usually more likely to be objects of entertainment than the awe-inspiring entities they have been in other times and places. The Halloween mask worn by a child, the Batman mask worn by a cosplayer, the obligatory mask of the killer in a horror movie... all of these may provoke some sort of relatively mild emotion, ranged on a spectrum from amusement to a momentary *frisson*.

But these masks are very distant in their effects from the masks worn through much of human history at religious ceremonies, *rites de passage*, and theatrical performances. Those masks were meant to - and probably usually did - invoke feelings of awe and wonder, as gods, spirits, demons and ancestors were once again brought into tangible existence through the ritualised powers of masking.

Anthropology has remained attuned to such matters, while sociology has by and large tuned out, probably because masks and associated practices have seemed so relatively unimportant. Yet masks are back, with a vengeance, around the world today, including in Western countries, and new masking practices are being created constantly. So, it is high time that a new sociology of masks and masking was put firmly onto the sociological agenda. It is very clear that today masks are bound up in many ways with all sorts of sociologically important phenomena: health and medicine, death and dying, social inequalities, ethnicity, politics... You name it, there will likely now be a masking aspect to it.

The revived sociology of masks needs to learn from the anthropological literature, which I imagine most sociologists are unfamiliar with. Purely by happenstance I read quite a lot of that literature a few years ago, and I wrote up a summary of it [1]. Despite massive differences between societies, throughout history and across the world there are nonetheless some recurring patterns as to how humans have created masks and deployed mask-related activities in social life. Here are just some of them...

1) **Masks stylize the human face.** But as socialization and cultural conditioning already shape how an individual's face looks and works from birth, the mask can be understood as a *double stylization* of the human visage.

2) Masks are intimately associated with **identity and transformations of identity.**

3) Masks often represent issues of **death and life.**

4) Masks are **powerful objects**, in various ways. Masks can operate as forms of protection, especially for participants in rituals. When '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' [2]. (Muslim veils may be understood by their wearer in similar terms, as means of avoiding being profaned and polluted by the surrounding environment.)

5) Masks are **potentially dangerous.** They have often been thought to be invested with dangerous powers that must be harnessed, such as the capacity to take over and possess the identity of the wearer.

6) **Masks are ambiguous.** They both hide and reveal, often simultaneously.

7) Masks may sometimes be efficacious, but they also may at times **fail to work.** Nothing was likely so distressing to the masked priest or theatre actor that the audience they were performing for may not accept the performance, instead seeing through the mask to the vulnerable, revealed person lurking behind it.

8) Masks are associated with the performance and imposition of **social order.** Hence their ubiquity in religious ceremonies around the world, which are aimed at dramatizing and then reconciling social and cosmological tensions. This may take more benign forms. Or it may involve very negative activities, like masked figures terrorising targeted groups (think, for example, of masked Klu Klux Klansmen).

9) Masks are involved with **social disorder.** Moralists across the centuries have often deplored the possibility that masking allows people to do things they otherwise would not be able to do or would not dream of doing otherwise. The archetypical case here concerns early modern carnivals in Catholic Europe, where religious and secular authorities were often very uneasy about the possibilities for licentiousness among a masked population, whereby the normal world was turned upside down, and individuals masqueraded as social types quite other than they usually were. (In 2020, the Venice carnival was cancelled, and the ornate masks of tourists were replaced by the face masks of locals.)

10) Masks are often deeply **political.** This is so both in the service of existing power structures, and in terms of resistance to them. The Guy Fawkes masks of contemporary anti-capitalist

protestors, inspired by the graphic novel and film *V for Vendetta*, is a case of popular cultural masking moving out into other, highly politicised domains.

11) Masks play significant roles in the symbolism of **crime and social deviance**. Avengers of wrongdoing like the Lone Ranger, Batman, and Zorro are masked, their (often ambivalent) righteousness signified by their fully or partly hidden faces. The masked, and thereby blind, female persona of Justice, holding scales in her hand, is a central feature of the semiotics of law and lawfulness. The oscillating perfidy and heroism of the bandit are represented and made possible by a face mask. The masked hangman and highwayman stand outside the law, one above and the other below it, their symbolic positioning made possible by their masked features.

12) Masks are deeply **gendered**. There is a long history of masked men in secret societies using masks to enforce gendered norms on women. There is an equally long history of female resistance to such enforcement. Masks can be made such as to represent what a group understands as the essence of masculinity, femininity and modes of gendered being somewhere in between. But masks can also be used for the purposes of transvestism and gender and sexual subversion.

13) We should not impose ocular-centric **Western assumptions** about masks onto masking practices worldwide. Ancient Greek science, ancient and medieval Christian moral philosophy, and early modern science all contributed to long-standing assumptions about the face in general, and the eyes in particular, as 'windows to the soul'. In Western masking practice, a mask is not really a mask unless the eyes are dealt with in some way. From this partly springs Western fears about Islamic veils and headgear, felt to be threatening because of the disappearance of the eyes from view. But other groups around the world have thought that the mouth, the nose, or even the ears are far more symbolically and practically crucial, and that the covering of those features by masks or other means is more important and powerful than hiding the eyes.

14) Masks influence and alter the **spaces**, and therefore also the **modes of social interaction**, between their wearers, and between wearers and non-wearers.

At least some of these anthropological insights can be drawn upon in developing the new sociology of masks. This will help in two inter-related ways: first, to bring a deeper theoretical understanding to bear on current mask phenomena; and second, to locate those phenomena both globally and historically. This allows us to see better which elements in contemporary masking practices are genuinely unprecedented, and which elements bear strong resemblances to things that have happened before, in other times and places.

Here are some ideas as to themes and topics that sociologists of masking, armed with the relevant anthropological literature, could focus on now, among many possible other areas.

Masks, spaces and interactions

The nature both of urban spaces and of the interactions going on within, and constitutive of, them, are altered in various ways, once large numbers of people start to wear masks. This is

especially so when those masks are both emblems and mechanisms of new forms of social-physical distancing. Masks enable and compel new forms of social intercourse. New forms of selfhood are both made possible by, and are created through, such intercourse. Novel forms of etiquette and politeness are generated. Stigmas and social sanctions are reinvented. When and how does masking move from individual eccentricity to enforced norm? Does a non-masked majority look at the masked person suspiciously, or do a masked majority dislike the apparently selfish and odd behaviour of those who still do not wear masks? How do individuals pay lip-service to masking without doing it ‘properly’? [Advice guides](#) for masked interactions proliferate online.

Masks and citizenship

The defining of masking as good citizenship, protecting others from you infecting them, and the making of your own [DIY mask](#), not only as an expression of self-preservation, but also as contributing to active, responsible citizenship.

The effects of compulsory masking of whole populations

Such as the laws being enforced in the [Czech Republic](#), Slovakia and the Italian region of [Lombardy](#), and masks being required to [enter shops in Austria](#).

Culturally and geographically variant responses to masks

We need to investigate how [culturally willing or reluctant](#) particular social groups are to wear masks during and after the pandemic. Many people in East Asia already wear them in the streets, habituated to do so in the wake of the SARS crisis. But widespread mask-wearing may be resisted by different Western populations for a variety of reasons, which sociologists should be well-equipped to identify.

Masks, national politics and border policing

Such as in the case of [border enforcement officials in the US](#) using scarce N95 respirators, that could otherwise be used by medics, to keep on raiding the homes of alleged illegal immigrants during the pandemic period.

The politics of heads and faces: masks and legal bans

The case of the [Hong Kong authorities](#) retaining a ban on masks, as a way of controlling mass demonstrations and identifying protestors facially, despite the need for face masking for health reasons.

The case of [French authorities](#) banning face covering, especially of a Muslim sort, except for ‘health reasons’, and the ambiguities likely to result from this situation. Lawyer and graphic designer Namira Islam Anani noted online the apparent double standard: ‘And here I was told covering your face was objectively offensive and a security threat’. ‘Didn’t they ban the niqab??’ one follower soon replied, adding ‘Now they are ok with covering the face!’.

Masks, international relations and global economics

Ongoing [‘mask wars’](#) between rival countries and actors, each trying to secure scarce mask supplies, leading to [‘bidding frenzies’](#), a sad reflection on the condition of inter-state solidarity today. Partly in contrast, the rise of [‘mask diplomacy’](#).

Masks, health and scientific authority

The [crises in health services](#) because of having too few medical masks, and [medics](#) resorting to supplies of masks wherever they can find them. Contradictory advice as to the [health-maintaining properties of masks](#), being given to national and global publics by [different authorities](#), with all sorts of confusions resulting.

Masks and social inequalities

People in disadvantaged ethnic groups being frightened of wearing face masks, as covering of the face may activate and exacerbate existing patterns of prejudice, such as being taken for [a robber by suspicious shopkeepers](#).

And in general, we may expect new masking practices to extend and deepen existing social inequalities, while perhaps creating novel dimensions of these. On the other hand, perhaps whole cities being masked will create some forms of social levelling.

Masks and gendered dynamics

Example: [Donald Trump](#) refuses to wear a mask (hiding behind a mask is perhaps an insufficiently masculine activity for on such as he), while [Melania](#) advises that everyone should wear one. (Melania Trump often operates with a mask-like face...)

Masks as sartorial objects

The ambivalent interplay of the face mask as [health object and fashion item](#). Advice as to how to [apply makeup](#) behind a mask or veil, maintaining your glamorous looks during pandemic conditions. (Compare and contrast with Muslim women’s veils intersecting with global fashion systems.) The [President of Slovakia](#) making a dramatic entrance with an ensemble of matching mask and gloves - a new kind of power dressing.

Masks as aesthetic objects

The appearance of face masks on [statues](#) across the world, signifying such possibilities as humour cultivating solidarities among people, or satire of established socio-political orders. The proliferation of mask-centred [street art](#).

Covid-19 is not going away any time soon, and its effects will be felt for decades to come. Whether mass masking remains in place in particular locations after the worst of the pandemic is over remains to be seen. But the mask will continue to haunt the world, both practically and symbolically. It already has become as emblematic of the current crisis as the [condom was for AIDS](#).

The new sociology of the mask’s time has indeed come.

References

[1] Inglis, David (2017) 'Cover Their Face: Masks, Masking, and Masquerades in Historical-Anthropological Context', in Almila, A and Inglis, D. (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook to Veils and Veiling Practices*, London: Routledge

[2] Nunley, John W. (1999) 'Introduction', in Nunley, J.W. and McCarty, C. eds.) *Masks: Faces of Culture*, New York: Harry N. Abrams.

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