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Friends, enemies and agonists: Politics, morality and media in the COVID-19 conjuncture

Sean Phelan

The radical democratic theorist Chantal Mouffe has long criticized the moralization of politics in its neoliberalized Third Way form. The argument informs her analysis of the rise of the far right, which she suggests has partly been enabled by moralizing antagonisms that inhibit a culture of agonistic political contestation. This paper uses Mouffe to think about the current condition of mediatized public discourse, extending her critique of moralized politics to a wider set of targets. I illuminate the argument through an analysis of a BBC Newsnight report that thematizes the "toxic" nature of public debate about the science of COVID-19. I show how the report internalizes sedimented "culture war" discourses about the polarized nature of today's public culture and, in the process, offers oblique insights into how far-right discourses are normalized. I end by considering some of the limitations of Mouffe's work as a resource for thinking about how to counteract the far right.

Keywords: Mouffe, morality, the political, media, culture wars, sedimented antagonisms, neoliberalism, far-right normalization, BBC, COVID science.

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Introduction[i]

In his 1991 book that popularized the term "culture wars" in the US, James Davison Hunter (1991) highlighted how politics, morality and media intersected in the constitution of cultural conflict. For him, the culture wars signifies forms of "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding" (42). "These moral visions take expression as *polarizing impulses* or *tendencies* [emphasis in original] in American culture" (43). These "*differences are often intensified and aggravated by the ways they are presented to the public"* [emphasis in original] in "media technology that….gives public discourse a life and logic of its own (34).

Hunter may have been writing about a specific national setting, historical context and media ecology. However, his argument still resonates, not least because of how culture war(s) discourses now circulate in societies beyond the US. The question of culture war is linked, in turn, to the question of far-right normalization. As the foreword to one recent collection puts it:

> The culture wars have been omnipresent for decades, but in the twenty-first century they have assumed a renewed prominence and a polarizing efficacy as a conduit for the gradual normalization of an emerging far-right authoritarian world order (Hlavajova, 2020:9)

This paper asks how might we think of the relationship between politics, morality and media in a conjuncture shaped by the normalization of far-right discourses. I approach this in part as a theoretical question by reflecting on Chantal Mouffe's account of the political. I also explore its

empirical implications with reference to a BBC Newsnight report about how the science of COVID has been politicized during the pandemic, in ways that illustrate the common sense authority of culture war discourses.

Mouffe's work (2005a, 2005b, 2018) offers a productive perspective for thinking about the relationship between morality and politics that speaks to the concerns of this special issue. Mouffe has long advocated a particular left strategy for countering the far-right that is reluctant to absolutely Other far-right discourses. She argues it would be a strategic mistake to assume that the far right can be defeated through discourses of moral condemnation. Instead, she insists on a "properly political" (Mouffe, 2005a: 10) response, which recasts far-right actors (or at least *some* far-right actors) as political adversaries that need to be defeated politically rather than constructed as absolute moral enemies.

Mouffe's (2005b) main target in arguing against the "moralization of political discourse" (57) has been a neoliberalized Third Way identity that frames the grand ideological struggles of the past as antiquated. The authority of this centrist political imaginary has been weakened in the last decade because of a fracturing of neoliberal hegemony. Nonetheless, its authority has not dissipated, while neoliberalism has taken on new "mutant" forms (Callison and Manfredi, 2019). The argument here is that the moralizing tendencies discussed by Mouffe now assume different, sometimes ill-defined, political articulations that give her argument a new salience.

The questions raised by engaging with Mouffe amount to more than abstract theoretical reflections. On the contrary, they resonate with many of the most visible faultlines of the current conjuncture. I show how the BBC report's thematization of the "toxic" nature of public debate about COVID

internalizes the sedimented authority of culture war discourses that find another expression in how "polarization" (Selvanathan and Crimston, 2020) has been a keyword of the pandemic imaginary. I also approach it as symptomatic of a longer historical trajectory, shaped by both the anti-political logic of neoliberalism and the far right's rearticulation of that logic in hyper-reactionary forms (Brown, 2019; Phelan, 2019).

The next section discusses how Mouffe conceptualizes "the political" and reframes her critique of moralized politics in a contemporary context. I follow that by clarifying the methodological orientation of my analysis, as it relates to critical discourse studies of far-right "normalization". I then introduce the BBC Newsnight example, moving from an analysis of the specific report to the development of a theoretical argument that goes beyond the immediate (con)text. I end by considering the limitations of Mouffe's work, which, despite its usefulness, does not adequately grasp the simultaneous political and moral implications of far-right normalization.

The moralization of politics

The post-Marxist discourse theoretical tradition associated with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) is anchored in a schematic distinction between "politics" and "the political" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Marchart, 2018). "Politics" is equated with a naturalized, taken-for-granted terrain of politics as usual. In contrast, "the political" corresponds to an ontological perspective on politics that involves a fundamental questioning of how existing social norms are constituted, reproduced and contested. The political is defined in terms of the entire spectrum of the social, as distinct from analyses that focus on a circumscribed universe of formal institutional politics. Researchers are encouraged to cultivate an analytical sensitivity to the potential

politicality of all social practices, not just those that fit with taken-for granted assumptions about what constitutes a political object of analysis.

Laclau and Mouffe's account of the political distinguishes itself from other theories of the political through the concept of antagonism. The notion of antagonism is often interpreted as signifying the inevitably, even desirability, of us/them conflicts. It is not difficult to find passages in Laclau and Mouffe's collaborative or individual work to support such a reading. However, this account of antagonism is one-dimensional because it obscures the ontological contingency of the social identities that structure any friend/enemy conflict. Oliver Marchart (2018) suggests Laclau's work sometimes misses an important distinction between the ontological implications of antagonism and concrete antagonistic representations. Antagonism not only draws attention to how different us/them discourses are empirically constructed. It also highlights "the ineradicable moment of negativity" (43) that goes into the making of antagonistic identities, which obscure their contingency by asserting themselves as fully-formed positive identities. The crucial ethico-political point is that it would be a travesty to interpret the post-Marxist tradition as somehow valorising every empirical example of a social antagonism, particularly in an atmosphere of repressive "culture war" politics.

In her own work, Mouffe distances herself from the nihilistic connotations of antagonism by affirming her commitment to agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2005a). This perspective holds that the very real existential and psychic draw of friend/enemy antagonisms needs to be transfigured into agonistic relations between political adversaries as part of a radical democratic ethos. Mouffe affirms her commitment to agonism in opposition to discourses that moralize politics, and, by implication, obscure the political ontology of the social. The moralization of politics works in part

by dramatizing friend/enemy conflicts that repress and stigmatize political difference. To question the norms of the existing social order is to risk being branded as a blanket enemy of that order, or to risk being seen as hopelessly dogmatic or amoral in one's prescriptions about how society should be organized.

Mouffe associates these moralizing tendencies with neoliberalism, especially in its nominally "progressive" Third Way form (Phelan, 2014). The Third way signifies (for Mouffe, as for many others) an exemplary post-political imaginary that represents traditional left-wing arguments as irrelevant to the managerial challenges of a market-centric polity.

For example, Mouffe (2005b) argued in 2005 that the ascendency of "right-wing populism" needs to be grasped as a "consequence" of a "post-political consensus" that has curtailed a culture of "effective democratic debate" (51). She then links the inadequacy of Third Way post-politics to the inadequacy of moralized condemnations of right-wing populist parties, in counterpoint to her own agonistic politics:

> …it is…crucial to understand that it is not through moral condemnation that those parties can be fought, and this is why most answers have so far been completely inadequate…. this moralisation of politics leads to the emergence of antagonisms that cannot be managed by the democratic process and redefined in what I propose to call an 'agonistic' way — i.e. as a struggle not between enemies, but between 'adversaries' who respect the legitimate right of their opponents to defend their positions (Mouffe, 2005b: 56)

The publication of the 2005 essay coincided with early manifestations of a "fourth wave" of far-right ascendency after world war two (Mudde, 2019). Mouffe (2018) revisited similar questions in 2018, now commending the possibility of a "left populism" as a strategic counter to the far right.

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The crux of her earlier argument was still clearly discernible. The depoliticizing legacy of Third Way neoliberalism is again blamed for facilitating the resurgence of reactionary forces. And the argument again dovetails into a pointed critique of moralized politics, this time highlighting the limitations of rhetoric that ostracizes right-wing actors:

> Classifying right-wing populist parties as 'extreme-right' or 'neofascist' and attributing their appeal to lack of education is of course especially convenient for the forces of the centre-left…. By establishing a 'moral' frontier so as to exclude the 'extremists' from the democratic debate, the 'good democrats' believe that they can stop the rise of 'irrational' passions. Such a strategy of demonization of the 'enemies' of the bipartisan consensus can be morally comforting, but it is politically disempowering (Mouffe, 2018:21-22)

Adapted to the empirical concerns of this paper, Mouffe's argument suggests a critique of how different political identities now name their designated political enemies, particularly on platforms like Twitter that "gamify" (Nguyen, 2021a) the communication of moral outrage (see also Bouvier, 2020). She attributes these moralizing tendencies to a "centre-left" identity that functions as a proxy for the Third Way. However, Mouffe's critique of moralized politics can be extended to a wider set of targets, without displacing the ongoing relevance of her critique of Third Way politics.

It is not hard to cite recent examples aligned with Mouffe's original critique, such as the moment during the 2016 US presidential campaign when Hillary Clinton suggested that "half" of Trump's supporters should be put into "the basket of deplorables" (Reilly, 2016). At the same time, we can point to other Third Way exemplars offering their own critique of moralized politics. For instance, at a 2019 forum on youth activism, Barack Obama rebuked online political culture for prizing images of political "purity" . His comments were reported as an intervention on the excesses of

"call-out culture" and "wokeness" (Rueb and Taylor, 2020), two culture war phantasms that are the habitual targets of far-right discourses that frame an entire spectrum of left-wing identities as morally decadent (Finlayson, 2022). These far-right discourses are normalized by their amplification in mainstream media spaces (Mondon and Winter, 2020) and their resonances with sedimented neoliberal discourses that disparage the notion of social justice (Phelan, 2019). Centrist reproach of the moral purity of "the woke" become its own idiom of moralized politics, where criticisms of the empty performativity of some political identities works to flatter the moral seriousness of others. These reproaches can, in turn, take a distinct left-wing form. Signifiers like "cancel culture" become part of the "chain of equivalence" (Laclau and Mouffe, 20021) distinguishing the true, authentic leftists from the moralizing, censorious liberals (Hedges, 2021). From another perspective again, some analysts of the putative left populism of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party argue that its political appeal was stifled by a tendency to moralize politics (Gilbert, 2020).

In short, these images of the political present bring into view a more complex conjunctural account of the moralization of politics than is suggested by Mouffe's one-dimensional focus on the Third Way. The significance of these conjunctural dynamics will be explored later. But I first need to say something brief about the methodological orientation of my analysis.

Methodological perspectives on the normalization of far-right discourse

Mouffe's work is aligned with a distinct discourse theoretical tradition that differs from more text-centric critical discourse analysis approaches. These differences have been discussed elsewhere (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007). But, in the context of this special issue, it is important to clarify how my analysis speaks to other critical discourse studies of far-right normalization.

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Within critical discourse studies, "normalization" has become a key concept for describing reactionary political formations, and analysing their strategic capacity to "recontextualize" what can be said as "part and parcel of mainstream or common thinking" (Krzyżanowski, 2020: 435; see also Wodak, 2019). It describes discursive processes that are a far remove from some affirmative notion of "normal", but rather highlights the success of far-right actors in redefining the acceptable idioms and boundaries of public discourse. Racist, misogynist and authoritarian discourses previously seen as morally abhorrent become "normalised as no longer deviant but, increasingly, standard elements of public discourse" (432). These strategies not only "pre-legitimize" the further embedding of reactionary norms, but also make it potentially harder to challenge the emboldened authority of what is articulated as a new common sense.

Mouffe would likewise oppose the normalization of far-right discourse. And she would appreciate Michal Krzyżanowski's (2020) recognition that the far-right's ascent needs to be grasped as a by-product of neoliberal hegemony. However, she would also insist on the need for a political analysis of the current conjuncture that differs from the more explicitly moral and judgmental orientation of critical discourse analysis (see Freeden, 2021). This impulse shapes the methodological orientation of my analysis in two important respects. First, I approach the topic of far-right normalisation obliquely by centring the empirical analysis around a BBC report that does not mention either the far right or right-wing populism. Instead, I show how the common sense contextual authority of discourses linked to normalization processes is implicit in the report's reflections on the "toxic" public debate about COVID. Second, my textual analysis of the BBC report is primarily descriptive, and thus challenges the assumption that the "mere" description of texts (Moi, 2017) is at odds with a commitment to critique. From a discourse theoretical perspective, this descriptive aspect has a clear critical objective. It aims to grasp the sedimented

discursive logic of the report on its own terms, before I move to an explicitly evaluative mode of analysis that illustrate my own affinities with Mouffe's critique of moralised politics.

My empirical analysis foregrounds the question of discursive context (Flowerdew, 2017; Krzyżanowski, 2020). I do not present a linguistic analysis of how texts are structurally organized in the fashion of much critical discourse studies. Instead, I am interested in illuminating the dynamic political context in which the texts are produced and articulated. My understanding of context is expansive, hence my preference for the cultural studies vocabulary of "conjunctural analysis" (Hall *et al.*, 2013). I stress the importance of moving retroductively (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) between descriptive, analytical and theoretical registers to grasp the significance of the immediate (con)text being analysed. The discursive context is given clear political definition, but through a broad historical lens that links some of the dynamics of the COVID conjuncture to the "path dependency" (Krzyżanowski, 2020) effects of culture war politics and neoliberal discourses. In effect, the examination of a media feature about COVID-19 becomes an entry point for critiquing the place of moralized politics in the current conjuncture, as part of a wider critique of the history of the present.

"Toxic" publicness in the COVID conjuncture

The empirical analysis centres on a BBC Two Newsnight report from November 2020 that was broadcast under the heading of "The science of Covid: Who's right and who's wrong?" (BBC Newsnight, 2020). The report was presented by Deborah Cohen, the programme's Health and Science correspondent, and broadcast for just under 13 minutes. It was framed in a way that – at least in some respects – might be commended by a post-foundational theorist like Mouffe. It thematized the contingent and uncertain nature of scientific evidence. It differentiated itself from

media representations that presuppose a monolithic view of science.

The report examined how the public scientific debate about COVID-19 has been constructed in the UK. It featured contributions from different expert sources, including general practitioners, paediatricians, and professors in epidemiology, psychiatry, the public understanding of science, health economics and geography. It covered different thematic frames, moving between, inter alia, a discussion of: the role of "subjectivity" in interpreting scientific evidence; the place of "uncertainty in the communication" of scientific knowledge; the impact of COVID on the National Health Service; the polarization of pro- and anti-lockdown discourses; the role of cost-benefit analysis in health service provision; and the wider social impact of COVID.

The aspect of the report of most interest here is how its reflections on public discourse about COVID brings together questions of politics, morality and media. This is cued by how Cohen frames the report at the start. On the one hand, she foregrounds the "huge amounts of time" that scientists spend in considering "the question of subjectivity `when interpreting evidence" in "normal times". On the other, she asks whether "that same questioning is still happening" in "these abnormal times"? That question then prompts two further questions, which operate as guiding questions for the rest of the report. "So how healthy has the [COVID] scientific debate been?". And "has it acknowledged what we just don't know?"

The opening sourced contributions answer these questions in a decidedly negative way by stressing the "toxic" nature of the public debate. The notion of a toxic public culture functions as a centring topos (Wodak, 2019) of the report. It enables common sense thematic connections to be made

between different experiences and anecdotes. It operates as a "meta-discursive" frame (Jaworski, Coupland and Galasinski, 2004), echoing familiar laments about the corrosive effects of ideological polarization (Nguyen, 2021b; Kreiss and McGregor, 2021). The theme is explicated in Cohen's framing of the first on-screen comment. She notes how she has "spoken to clinicians, academics and public health doctors who cannot speak, because their employers won't allow it". She notes how she has "spoken to workers who have been disciplined for speaking publicly". And she notes how "there are others who have genuine expertise who are reluctant to share their thoughts because they're too scared". The backstage journalistic detail serves to dramatize a discursive context where individual experts and brand-conscious institutions are afraid to talk publicly because of the fear of public censure.

This frame is personalized in the first on-screen contribution by Professor Clare Gerada, former President of the Royal College of General Practitioners. Cohen sets up the contribution by suggesting Gerada was "happy to publicly discuss aspects of COVID" earlier in the year, "but is now very reluctant" to do so "because the debate has become far too toxic". Gerada links her fear of speaking out publicly to a fear of moral condemnation:

> It's very difficult to discuss Covid…it's difficult to discuss the nuances of the approach to Covid. What you actually have to do is to discuss, debate, look at options, weigh up the evidence, and then for our politicians to come to the right decision, for the right number of people. *But even saying that, one gets accused of wanting to kill people, of not wanting to save lives, which is nonsense* [italics added].

The toxic discourse frame is extended to a second contribution from Dr. Sunil Bhopal, a paediatrician and lecturer at Newcastle University. Cohen contextualizes the contribution by suggesting that when Bhopal argued in April "that children were at very low risk from Covid itself, but risked significant harm from Covid restrictions, he faced a furious backlash from some". Bhopal's on-screen comments link the backlash to online actors, by noting "the accusations [that] have been thrown at me online". The comment is the only explicit reference to online media in the report, though the general culpability of "the media" is broached by Cohen later. That cues a contribution from David Spiegelhalter, Professor in the Public Understanding of Risk, who suggests that the media's "traditional view of science" as a "monolithic body of agreed facts", and the use of "ridiculous" homogenizing tropes like "scientists say", has not adequately prepared "the general public" to deal with a normalized culture of scientific disagreement.

The comments from Gerada and Bhopal, along with other contributions lamenting the debate's "polarization" and politicization, are then contextualized by a comment from Professor George Davey Smith, a clinical epidemiologist at Bristol University. Cohen introduces Smith as one of the authors of a recent British Medical Journal (BMJ) article "that provoked quite a storm in academic circles", because, under the heading of "conflicts of interest", it offered the novel declaration "that all three authors have been wrong about Covid-19". "In an article about how little we really know about Covid", Cohen describes the point as "very deliberate", before moving to direct comments from Smith himself. Smith questions the performative certainty of "some commentators – "whatever side of the debate they're on" – who "have been saying exactly the same thing right from the beginning" of the pandemic, as if indifferent to the evidence constructed in the interim. The article is worth quoting from directly, because of how it explicates the moralized dimensions

of discourses that assert certainty over the knowability of COVID and its consequences:

> In the "science" of covid-19, certainties seem to be everywhere. Commentators on every side—academic, practitioner, old media or new—apparently know exactly what's going on and exactly what to do about it. We are not talking about those who insist that hydroxychloroquine will save us all, or who call face masks "muzzles" or "face nappies"…Rather, we are thinking of the many rational people with scientific credentials making assertive public pronouncements on covid-19 who seem to suggest there can be no legitimate grounds for disagreeing with them. If you do, they might imply, it's probably because you're funded by dark forces or vested interests, you're not evidence based, you're morally blind to the harm you would do, you're ideologically driven (but I'm objective), you think money matters more than lives, your ideas are a dangerous fantasy" (Smith, Blastland and Munafò, 2020)

Taken together, the BBC report and BMJ article offer rich, ideologically resonant reflections on a discursive context where arguments about COVID, including "strong" modal expressions of "certainty" (Vukovic, 2014) about the knowability of COVID, have clear moralizing valences. I now need to clarify how they can be analyzed with reference to Mouffe's argument about moralized politics to illuminate conjunctural dynamics that go beyond the immediate texts.

The BBC report is a symptom of a mediatized public culture shaped by the moralized antagonisms of "culture war" politics. Its lament about the toxic nature of public debate implicitly speaks to a culture war frame, though the term is never used explicitly. The report offers its own moralized

intervention on the excesses of polarized discourses that inhibit a culture of truth-seeking public debate. It acknowledges (in broad strokes) the complicity of traditional media and online media in this toxic culture, but attributions of political responsibility are vague and anonymized. We get de-peopled nominalized references to discursive "accusations" and "polarization", and generic attributions to what "some" and "many commentators" say.

The reluctance to broach questions of political agency or ideological motivation has one obvious institutional and political economic explanation in the BBC's public service broadcasting culture. The enduring myth of an objective and impartial broadcasting voice that exaggerates its autonomy from the state (Mills, 2020) cultivates mystifying representations of politics, illustrated in this instance by the report's displacement of the role of the Tory government in fomenting the kind of toxic public discourse that is lamented. The reluctance to attribute responsibility to specific political forces becomes a formulaic journalistic script for amplifying a mediatized culture war narrative where the extremes of left and right (i.e. "both sides") are depicted as equally culpable for the problem of political polarization (Nguyen, 2021b). Read through these sedimented discourses, the culture of "toxic debate" described by the programme conceivably satisfies different ready-to-hand contextual explanations. Some viewers blame the "dogmatic politicization" (Krzyżanowski, 2020) of far-right actors, while others blame the forces of "left-wing cancel culture". Therefore, in one respect, the report exemplifies the kind of moralized antagonisms lamented by Mouffe, because of its aversion to offering a political analysis of the problem it diagnoses.

Nonetheless, if we go with the grain of the report's own discursive assumptions – and accept that

it describes real social experiences that amount to more than self-serving ideological representations – it does illuminate a conjunctural context where far-right discourses are normalized through moralized antagonisms that blur assumed distinctions between left, right and liberal identities, in the fashion of the kind of "borderline discourses" discussed by Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017). Translated into the language of affect, we might think of it as an affective public mood where a banal "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Felski, 2015) circulates without a clear ideological, political or discursive mooring

The BMJ article is important here because of how it explicates discursive topoi already implicit in the BBC report. Consider, for example, the formulation about compromised scientists who are "funded by dark forces or vested interests". We have become familiar in the COVID conjuncture with how the general cultural circulation of these suspicious tropes can be recontextualized by different ideological constituencies to dramatize political narratives of good and evil, in ways that find one ideological valence in neoliberal axioms about the self-interested nature of social action (Phelan, 2014). These tropes might be conceivably invoked as part of a radical left critique of the political-economic power of "Big Pharma", and surely a quite reasonable critique in a COVID-world marked by profound inequities in the distribution and licensing of vaccines. Conversely, they may be deployed by far-right actors to also critique the political-economic power of Big Pharma, *but* explained through a plotline of conspiratorial equivalences to, inter alia, Bill Gates, George Soras, 5G, the globalists, the mainstream media, and the administrative state. The ideological nebulousness of these tropes recalls a 2004 argument of Bruno Latour's (2004) that is even more salient today: about how the "weapons of critique" can be deployed in distinctly reactionary ways.

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Within a discourse theoretical framework, the moralized antagonisms described in the BBC report and BMJ article can be conceptualized as sedimented antagonisms: features of today's mediatized polity that have become normalized, because of the familiarity of moral panics about the polarized nature of a social-media driven public culture (Nguyen, 2021b). The notion of a "sedimented antagonism" (Marchart, 2018) is a somewhat paradoxical notion for discourse theorists, because antagonistic representations are usually framed as disruptive of the sedimented order. However, the paradox can be grasped if we equate sedimented antagonisms with culture war narratives that are also deeply anti-political, because of how they reproduce predictable talking points and arguments in a cliched fashion.

To refuse to submit our understanding of the political to depoliticizing cliches is to refuse to legitimize a now normalized vocabulary for talking about the relationship between politics, media and morality that is never directly articulated in either the BBC report or the BMJ article, but central to understanding the discursive context in which the texts are produced. I am talking here of signifiers like "cancel culture", "wokeness", "social justice warriors", "virtue signalling", all of which are now primarily used – in moralizing rhetoric (Finlayson, 2022) – to criticize censorious moral discourses that are over-associated with online culture, and over-associated with left-wing and progressive identities.

These signifiers should be regarded with strategic caution because they have become potent far-right political weapons that acquire their normalizing power through an ability to easily move between different discursive contexts (Phelan, 2019). They can be deployed in vicious ways that

are coded as humorous in online platforms to attack different minority identities. They can be deployed by centrist newspaper columnists to mock the Twitter reaction to some controversy. Or they can be deployed by nominal left-wing identities to dismiss other nominal left-wing identities as bourgeois moralists.

To reformulate the political stakes in Mouffe's terms, we cannot formulate an avowedly *political* account of the current conjuncture if we (unthinkingly) affirm the hackneyed vocabulary of culture war, or over-rely on depoliticizing arguments about ideological polarization (Kreiss and McGregor, 2021) This is not least because of how this vocabulary can enliven its own form of moralized (anti)politics in the profoundly reactionary notion that the world would be fine if "the left" simply stopped "politicizing" things. At the same time, if we want to grasp the relationship between politics, media and morality today, we need to do more than simply dismiss (as some on the left are inclined to do) everything that is signified under weaponized headings such as "cancel culture", which is also to say that we shouldn't dismiss the BBC's report insights into how scientific and political disagreements are now moralized. Instead, we need to critically understand how and why such terms are articulated, because, even if we hate their assumed common-sense-ness (and their displacement of other political questions), they are doing potent ideological and discursive work that facilitates the normalization of reactionary imaginaries. The point can only be signposted here. But we might think of it as a research strategy that better disarticulates the different material-discursive elements that go into the making of objects of discourse like "cancel culture", as part of affirming the possibility of an emancipatory politics.

Conclusion and caveats

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This paper offered an analysis of the current conjuncture that recontextualized Chantal Mouffe's critique of the moralization of politics by examining a BBC report that discussed the "toxic" public debate about the science of COVID-19. I highlighted how the report depoliticized the problem it diagnosed, but also productively illuminated how public discourse is now moralized. I argued that the report showed how far-right discourses can be normalized not through the overt legitimation of far-right arguments, but rather through the tacit reproduction of media-driven culture war narratives that mystify questions of political agency and blur assumed boundaries between left and right. Rather than dismissing the image of the present constructed by the report, I suggested that it should be taken seriously because of how it describes a normalized culture of moralized antagonisms that implicates different identities, including left-wing and progressive identities that have become habitual targets of far-right mockery and antagonism.

The argument has been written from a place of broad agreement with Mouffe. I want to conclude by noting aspects of her analysis that are less convincing, because of her tendency to dichotomize politics and morality. This critique can only be articulated in a very cursory way here, but I will focus on three points that speak to this special issue's focus on countering the normalization of far-right discourses.

First, Mouffe's work does not offer adequate theoretical resources for distinguishing between bad and good forms of politicization (Aytac, 2021), including forms of "radical politicization" that turn transgressive "norm-breaking" into its own social norm (Krzyżanowski, 2020). Ugur Aytac (2021) describes Mouffe's pluralism as "an overly permissive pluralism" (417), that arguably cannot satisfactory grasp some of the reactionary forms of politicization manifest around COVID-

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19.

Second, Mouffe does not offer adequate resources for distinguishing between good and bad forms of "moral politics" (Standring and Donoghue, 2022). She recognizes that politics, including her own agonistic politics, always entails a moral and ethical dimension. However, in general she does not want to talk about morality much, other than opposing it to the logic of the political. Morality is conceptualized rather reductively as the common-sense moral codes embedded in sedimented social practices. We rarely get any sense in her work of how moral and political imperatives might intersect to affirm agonistic principles and passionate forms of politics (Morrison, 2018). Unlike her go-to bogeyman Habermas (see Dahlberg, 2014), her work does not offer much in the way of concrete normative criteria for distinguishing between political enemies and political adversaries

Finally, a point about media. In the 2005 essay cited earlier, Mouffe (2005b) offers a revealing remark about the Freedom Party's tenure in government in Austria in the early 2000s, suggesting "the best argument against" the imposition of a "cordon sanitaire" against far-right parties participating in government is their dismal governmental performance. The case showed how tactics that were effective in opposition were revealed to be wholly inadequate once the party was in power. I cite the point not to question Mouffe's analysis of Austrian politics, but rather to note how it is not hard to hear the echo of a quintessentially liberal trope beloved of journalists in her argument, about how "sunlight is the best disinfectant" for exposing dangerous political ideas (Peters, 2005) – a liberal journalistic credo that different authors have critiqued for its complicity with normalization processes (Phillips, 2018; Mondon and Winter, 2020). The point recalls, in turn, a criticism of the post-Marxist tradition voiced by Michael Freeden (2021). It has not been

great at grasping the significance of everyday forms of politics, in part because of its privileging of an ontological understanding of the political that – not without irony – deems some accounts of politics to be more "proper" than others (Devenney, 2020).

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