Plague jobs:
US workers' schismogenetic approaches to social contracts

Ilana Gershon

Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, igershon@indiana.edu

Abstract

In this homage to David Graeber, I turn to Americans' experiences working in person during the pandemic as an ethnographic lens for understanding how workers respond when implicit social contracts are violated and when ideas about the common good are being contested. Because the United States federal government and many state governments refused to mandate appropriate pandemic protocols, businesses became the source of pandemic regulation in the United States. During the pandemic, Americans have been made vividly aware of the tacit social contracts shaping their workplace commitments. Building upon Graeber's insight that at the heart of work is a complex theory of contract and exchange, I explore how contractual sociality shapes Americans' understandings of the political possibilities available to them at work. I focus in particular on the icon of the Trumpian Republican and how other Americans are responding by turning to historically grounded visions of the common good. In general, this article explores what the pandemic has revealed about Americans' political imagination, about how to govern and be governed in the workplace, with a Graeberian focus on the role that contractual sociality plays in structuring this imagination.

KEYWORDS: pandemic, workplaces, private government, common good, social contracts

Introduction

I am writing this at a moment in which many wonder how to make the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic into a springboard for crafting a more hospitable, more egalitarian, more cooperative world. You are reading this at a moment in which some of my contemporaries' hopes will seem laughingly foolhardy and others prescient. I write in a time filled with possibility and despair in equal measure. What better time to be in dialogue with David Graeber, the master bricoleur of realisable possibilities? He was an anthropologist of the concrete otherwise, adept at pointing out when other cultures used different premises to create more liveable relationships than Euro-American ones. As an activist, he was committed to acting as if the world he desired already existed, turning the longed-for otherwise into the lived moment. One of the questions I am now asking, inspired by David Graeber's interventions, is: in this moment in which the otherwise is etched in neon for so many, what are the logics by which Americans insist on change, and, conversely, why do they continue to participate in unequal and personally disadvantageous conditions?

Some of the answers to when and how Americans begin to insist on political and social change during a pandemic lies in the available positions provided by the US political imagination. European readers might find those on the political left in the United States to be committed to a phantasmagoria of left-leaning liberal and socialist ideas, none of which cohere into recognisable political party positions within Europe. Indeed, Graeber, in his article *Neoliberalism, or the bureaucratization of the world*, discusses how Americans have developed longstanding political associations with terms such as 'liberal' and 'socialist' that are orthogonal to how Europeans and Latin Americans understand political divides (Graeber, 2009, p. 80). In this article, I argue that the political positions in the United States are defined through schismogenesis, with the incoherent left and the Republican right constantly labouring intently to differentiate from one another, which in the pandemic workplace has meant maintaining precise inversions around ideas of the common good and regulation (see Bateson, 1972).

Throughout the pandemic, I have been researching and writing in David's long shadow, asking Americans to tell me about the decisions that lead them to work in person during the pandemic: their own decisions, their employers' decisions, and how everyone in their workplaces contributes to creating a sense of risk or safety. Currently, American workers feel sharply, often in ways they never have felt before, that their workplaces are asking them to put their lives at risk, or even more complicatedly, put their loved ones' lives at risk. Sometimes they risk working so that other people can buy groceries, or

travel across town by bus, or learn how to multiply fractions. This changes some people's perceptions of whether their jobs are worth the risk that they are now taking. The calculus is often more complex than "your job or your life". Many worry that working in person during the pandemic might transform them into a vector of disease; infecting others haunts them more than dying themselves. The Americans I interviewed sound like Enlightenment thinkers, worried about the common good and one's social obligations to one's community and to one's family. This is always in counter distinction to imagined Trumpian Republicans. As people think anew about their previous commitments, they are also always defining themselves against their proximate political other, anti-maskers, and now often, anti-vaxxers.

Like David Graeber's research for *Bullshit jobs* (2018), I rely on interviews and not participant observation. My personal strategies for researching during a pandemic involved talking to over 310 people by Zoom or by phone from my house, with help from my postdoctoral researcher, Anna Eisenstein. I worried about being a human vector myself and so did not meet anyone in person. The interviews were primarily conducted between May 2020 and late January of 2021, and many focused on the early establishment of pandemic norms as glimpses into what I could learn about workplaces as sites of private government (Anderson, 2017) by understanding how they respond to the pandemic crisis. My analysis is primarily based on an early stage of the pandemic, although Anna Eisenstein continues to interview in 2021 and 2022. I found potential interlocutors by asking friends and then those I interviewed for suggestions of possible contacts. I also requested interviews in Facebook groups where people already were prone to give advice. I interviewed anyone who volunteered. Doing so allowed me to collect accounts of people's experiences of the pandemic at work from a geographically diverse group, interviewing people who were independent contractors, retail workers, office workers, middle management, and so on. My interviews were structured as oral histories of the pandemic. I explored how people learned about the pandemic, when their workplace began to respond, and how decisions around various Covid-19 protocols were made and enforced in workplaces. In general, I interviewed people across the United States, from Hawai'i to Massachusetts, and in a wide range of jobs: a pilot, a pest exterminator, a beautician, doctors, retail workers, factory workers, and many other job roles. The sample is thus very broad within the United States, but I am limited to analysing other people's social analysis of their workplaces. There were no moments in which I could compare what people did and how they interacted with others with what they told me that they did.

When I asked people for interviews, I did not have as evocative an essay to point to as *On the phenomenon of bullshit Jobs: A work rant* (2013), which Graeber did when he began to research his book, *Bullshit jobs* (2018). I said that I wanted to talk to anyone who had to work in person during the pandemic. I was curious about how the decision was made to work in person both by employers and employees. Haunted by Graeber's imagination, I wanted to know more about people who decided to put themselves in harm's way for a job, perhaps even for a bullshit job. I was curious about how people understood the bargains they were making, with themselves, with their employers, and with their co-workers. I wanted to understand how decisions around risk were being made in different workplaces and when and how people were able to participate in the decisions that were affecting their safety.

People's experiences working in person during the Covid-19 pandemic often encourage them to reflect on the implicit social contracts that underpin their experiences at work, reflections that Graeber would have gleefully pointed to as evidence of how much a moral sensibility built on just exchange underlies many of the commitments people make that then quickly transform into gross inequities. Graeber was a master at uncovering with speedy ease the ways in which seemingly innocuous and commonplace social arrangements and institutions were, in fact, the building blocks of persistent inequality. Debt, bureaucracy, bosses—all are taken as commonplace necessities by many to coordinate the social goals upon which individuals can all supposedly agree. Graeber, however, showed the repeated betrayals of common-sense notions of justice in these imbalanced practices of distributing resources, knowledge, and power.

His take on the employment contract was no exception. With echoes of Enlightenment thinkers and Marcel Mauss in his formulation, he argues that the wage-labour contract is an agreement putatively between equals when initiated, and one in which equality is always about to re-emerge—when the worker stops working at the end of the day or quits their job. Yet it is also a contract distinctive in having people begin the negotiation as equals and finalise the negotiations in a hierarchical relationship in which the boss can control, direct, and monitor the employee (see also de Stefano, 2019; Tomassetti, 2020). What makes this inequality desirable to anyone? In exchange for offering the boss so much control over a hopefully set period in an employee's day, the employee gets security. And as Graeber points out in discussing Mauss (2002, p. 162): there is a widely recognised understanding in this exchange that giving the employer a limited set of hours for a wage is not actually just. The worker is selling a portion of their life and so deserves some compensation for the life handed over to the employer (compensation in

the form of a pension, health insurance, and other benefits depending on the country and company).

In previous decades, neoliberalism has gradually been eroding this understanding of the employment contract. Neoliberalism, in general, has a tendency to take older constructions and animate them with new meanings. Carol Greenhouse points out that neoliberalism is often 'borrowing the language of rights to sustain markets, citizens' forums to deflect social movements, public office for pursuit of private interests, and credit relationships as channels of social control.' (2012, p. 4) The employment contract is no exception. In an article I wrote at David Graeber's request (2011), I argue the change from the liberal self to the neoliberal self is a change in the metaphor of ownership. Liberal selves own themselves as though they are property, and so "rent" themselves out to employers for set periods. And yet, as Graeber points out, when you commit to working for another, you are committing a portion of your life to another person's demands. The contractual bargain always has an ethically tinged surplus beyond the simple wages for hours worked equation. Under neoliberalism, however, the self owns itself as though it were a business, and entering into a version of a business-to-business contract (see Gershon, 2017, 2019 for elaboration). Neoliberal logics seek to remove from the employment contract precisely the ethical sensibility underlying a Maussian exchange that recognises an hour of someone's life is different than an hour of corporate time.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, many Americans are turning away from a neoliberal take on the bargains they were making at work. The pandemic re-configures how US workers understand the employment contract; people are all too aware that the risks in the pandemic mean that going to work is exchanging autonomy and potentially health in exchange for economic security. With this realisation, they began to question anew the ways in which economic security was taken to be tightly interwoven with one's healthy life under these contracts. People began to think about the constraints and compromises they had accepted by working, and began to wonder if they wanted to continue accepting these compromises. They began to dabble in imagining life otherwise and also often evaluated anew the reasons they were working in the first place, and what obligations should accompany their commitment to work.

People were experiencing the workplace as a site of private government (Anderson, 2017; Macaulay, 1986), and the crisis of a pandemic reveals much about people's analysis of workplaces as governable communities that lie somewhere on a continuum between autocracy and democracy. The question on the mind of anyone who has to work in person is: how can we all interact in ways that keep the business going in ways that do not

make people sick. In short, they are confronting capitalism's Covid. In the United States, this turns quickly into a question of establishing rules and enforcement, a question of government as a necessary supplement to capitalism. One way to think about the pandemic workplace responses is as a grand ethnomethodological experiment in every workplace where people had to interact in person with each other. People suddenly became conscious of all the small repertoires they had established with their co-workers and customers to accomplish even the most minor of tasks. All the Covid-19 protocols involve developing new regulations and practices for how to walk down a hallway, how to manage a change of shifts, how many people could go to a multi-use bathroom, how to hold meetings and classes safely on Zoom, how long books should be quarantined in a library, and on and on. For example, pre-pandemic work shift changes around police call centres involved a five-minute overlap in which people chatted about the calls that came in that day, as well as the vacations people were about to take, or the roller-skating rink their children loved. This casual exchange of information was an essential backchannel guaranteeing the smooth functioning of the call centre. In the pandemic, it is no longer possible. Either people develop alternatives over time or the information is no longer circulating.

To prevent aerosol and the no longer feared surface viral spread, people have to change their behaviours in ways best understood with an ethnomethodological astuteness for transforming shared repertoires of how one moves through space and conversations with others. All this occurs while the virus exists as an ontologically uncertain entity, with everyone in a given workplace having slightly or hugely different understandings of how best to deal with Covid risk or whether there are Covid risks in the first place. In the United States, there is a fairly significant disagreement over what constitutes actionable evidence and what kinds of actions are warranted. Is surface spread a problem? How safe is meeting indoors, and what can people do to make it safer? Nevertheless, workplaces had to function; they had to present some sort of enforceable practices over social distancing, masking, and similar Covid protocols so that everyone could manage to get the required tasks done.

Deciding on the rules is hard enough, but enforcing the rules became a treacherous social land mine. Not surprisingly, simply posting a sign that everyone entering a store must mask did not lead to everyone masking. I collected many stories about all the moments in which compliance with Covid protocols were up for grabs – and it was often radically in doubt how a particular encounter in which compliance was up in the air

would be resolved. People were thinking anew about bureaucratic regulation and what kinds of protections they could rely on when they live by the precepts of bureaucracy

This was also a moment at which many people at work were compelled by circumstances to think consciously about something that Graeber was fond of reminding all of us: it could be otherwise. So many mundane practices were overturned: students were not taking end-of-the-year standardised tests, renters were not being evicted, the homeless were being housed in hotels. So many of the ways in which people were being disciplined into appropriate consumers, workers, and students became optional. Moreover, so many of the ways in which people had managed spatial configurations in stores and offices were being done in new ways. The pandemic was making all of us into interpreters of the otherwise. However, as Graeber would want me to point out, even with all the options being imagined, people invariably privileged mandates or regulations as the only way to get everyone to mask, socially distance, and so on. No one seemed to be suggesting an alternative to regulation that still resulted in everyone being masked; people were still trapped in social contract models of social control. People either wanted no Covid-19 protocols in place, which could lead to everyone's individual choice about what they should do (in practice this time and time again seemed to lead to very few people masking, and the resulting expected spread of the virus) or people wanted some form of regulation that would allow the possibility for other people to be told what to do (like wearing an N95 mask) and coerced into doing it. The bureaucratic imagination was firmly entrenched (Graeber, 2015).

At the same time, Americans were realising how incredibly challenging it is to create these alternatives because, in the United States, it is generally socially unacceptable to tell another person what to do unless they are a member of your family or you are bound to them by contract. The act of telling another person what to do became very politically charged in the pandemic, although this was a moment in which some people desperately longed to tell other people what to do because they felt that their communities' well being depended on particular behaviours. At the same time, many on the right publicly appeared and appear to be working towards creating a political space without persuasion—not only is telling forbidden but so is being persuadable or persuading other people. In the section below, I address the consequences of turning the commonplace practice of telling another person what to do or even trying to persuade them into a charged political act.

The pandemic as fodder for political identities

Much to my fieldwork interlocutors' surprise, and my own, one's political identity rapidly became a touchstone for understanding how and why people responded to Covid-19, and especially pandemic protocols, in the ways that they did. I did not interview anyone opposed to wearing a mask, and while most of my interviews took place before vaccination was possible, the conversations I had around vaccination in my interviews led me to suspect that everyone I spoke to would most likely get vaccinated whenever this was possible. People regularly expressed surprise that masking had become a political statement and struggled to understand why. Many believed that refusing to mask was a Republican thing, and especially a rural Republican thing. Yet the Republicans I interviewed also supported masking and the other Covid-19 protocols such as social distancing.

While Republicans and Democrats in practice are heterogeneous, part of being an everyday social analyst on the ground in the US workplace, especially during the pandemic, means often overlooking this heterogeneity. Political affiliation functions as a handy shorthand to explain specific types of social difficulties workers face or types of compromises they have to make when dealing with customers, bosses, or co-workers. In this section, I describe what a Trumpian Republican seems like as a political actor in workplaces from the perspective of someone who would like some form of Covid-19 protocols to be followed. My interviewees would often mention Republicans because in casual conversation, they are such a reliable reference to signal you are about to describe other people's problematic relationship to the common good. This alternative relationship also affects the ways my interlocutors understand the compromises they themselves are making at work. Trumpian Republicans often serve as a counterexample of what some people find to be acceptable behaviour.

In case I haven't been clear enough, this section is not about what Trumpian Republicans actually think or do, it is how they are understood by the people they address as citizen enemies. After all, to grasp how some Americans understand the hazards of working in person means understanding what it means to be a fellow citizen and often co-worker with someone you think is acting deliberately in ways that risk infecting you with a poorly understood disease that could harm you, kill you, or lead you to infect those you love. People are thinking not only about what it means to work in person but what it means to work in person with someone who has such a radically different relationship to the common good, and whether or not Trumpian Republicans do have this relationship to the common good, it is worth laying out what their relationship looks like when

they will explain their perspective to people these Trumpian Republicans believe should think and act otherwise.

The position I am describing derives from a much more widespread American take on sociality that I mentioned earlier. There is a core American tenet: the only instances in which it is acceptable to tell another person what to do is when you are bound to them by kinship or contract. Your boss or your mother can tell you what to do, with the expectation that you will in fact do as they order, but not your co-worker, a store clerk, or even your doctor. Most Americans engage with this tenet in one way or another, whether believing it themselves or living alongside people who do. Nevertheless, they often also have countless instances in their own lives in which they might, in fact, tell another person what to do and experience being told what to do. Thus, there is a wide range of how they deal with the imperative not to tell another person what to do in practice: some people violate this tenet all the time, others go through verbal contortions to tell someone what to do when they are not in a structural position to do so. This axiom has often led Americans to have quite contorted conversations and tense attempts at problem-solving as they try to get others to do what they want without the act of telling. The taboo around telling is not absolute; in some situations, people weigh other imperatives, such as saving a life.

What has happened in the pandemic, however, is that for Trumpian Republicans this taboo does become an absolute. For them, there is no justification for anyone not bound by kinship or contract to ever tell someone what to do. More surprisingly, you do not have a contract with your government, not even a social contract as Locke and Hobbes might insist. Thus, the government should not be a source of regulation, and especially not pandemic regulations. Republican governors and legislatures began to pass laws in 2021 against mask mandates, even at the local level. The pandemic makes it visible that even a regulation meant to save people's lives is anathema with Republicans' stance against abortion a striking exemption[1] (and Republican's adoption of pro-choice slogans to defend their anti-vaccination stances—pitting the right to bodily autonomy against the right to life—leading to much bemusement on the part of those they seek to antagonise). All of this is complicated that much more by the fact that Trumpian Republicans appear, to a large measure, to have decided not to engage in the political labour of persuading others or being open to persuasion themselves.[2]

---

[1] This has led Michael Gerson, a longstanding Republican opposed to Trump to write: 'How can the anti-vaccine ideals of "my body, my choice" Republicanism—which refuses even the easiest and safest sacrifices to protect the life of a neighbor—coexist with a "culture of life"?' (Gerson, 2021).

[2] Republicans even decided not to have a platform in their 2020 Republican National Convention, a statement against seeing persuasion as an integral part of representative democracy if there ever was one.

In the pandemic, many people long to be able to tell others what to do to prevent the spread of the virus. These people take for granted that the common good could and should be a basis for evaluating when one might tell another person what to do. They are deeply puzzled that protecting other people's lives in the community is not reason enough to wear a mask, or accede to new social norms. One contact tracer in a red state, who was growing weary of how difficult it was simply to do his job, pointed out to me that although two-year-olds are often very resistant, everyone has learned to wear pants. Surely masks are not more of a burden on one's freedom? However, these positions, which I want to discuss in terms of relationships to regulation below, are also caricatures of how people interact in workplaces. True, these problems are dramatically visible at work as long as the workplace enables a range of stranger sociality: customers will encounter supermarket workers they have never seen before, or nurses deal with new patients all the time. In workplaces where people have been working alongside each other for a while, political identification is a shallow, albeit commonly used, lens for explaining the complex social interactions happening at work and why people are reacting to Covid protocols in the ways they are.

Social media during the pandemic has been littered with interactions between American liberals and conservatives asserting over and over again this tension between the liberal's insistence on the moral imperative to act with the common good in mind and the conservative's insistence on the freedom from telling and the freedom from engaging with persuasion. On the day I sat down to write about this conundrum, yet again I came across a typical version of this exchange about whether to vaccinate in my Facebook feed (anonymised). Here Judith, a Facebook friend of mine, began arguing with Frank below an image of a sign posted to Facebook stating "Danger: They are conditioning you to view your freedom as selfish":

> Frank: Ignore the liberal bullshit. It's not your place to be bothered with someone else's fears … or their health issues your family is your responsibility. That's where it stops. Those who insist that the freedoms that we will not relinquish are killing people suffer from the delusion that their health/life is something that is anyone's responsibility except their own. If they are scared, let them lock themselves up for the rest of their lives and die alone. Other people insisting that it's selfish not to believe the way they believe just to protect them is typical liberal crap. They don't realize how unbelievably stupid they sound. It's like asking me to diet and exercise so they won't be fat.

Judith: If you're spreading disease-causing organisms, other people's illness IS your fault. It's selfish as hell to demand the right to kill other people because you are mildly inconvenienced. On the other hand, if you want to kill yourself, I guess we can't stop you.

Frank: Whether you live or die doesn't mean anything to me. You're not my problem… you should do for you whatever you see fit … and stay out of everyone else's business … I'm sorry that you feel I'm killing … but not sorry enough to care one way or the other… just because people don't think like you does not make them selfish … or racist or whatever other liberal agent label you care to try and shove up their ass … It makes them an individual with the right to choose… period.

Hey man a friend of mine died after the vac. And it really bothers me … especially since he was not sick before … so listening to a liberal trying to tell me I'm selfish for exercising my right to choose… sorry it's nobody business what I do about my health.

…

Judith: Honestly? I think people who refuse to care about possibly killing other people are serious jerks. I mean, do other people deserve to die because you are careless? That's just a really jerk move. The vaccine has an adverse events rate of 0.00019%. That is very, very few cases. Meanwhile, over 700,000 people have died of COVID. If you can't see that the vaccine is safer than getting COVID, you don't understand math.

This has zero to do with politics and everything to do with simple probability.

Frank: And at what point did I ever say that I was not an asshole—lol. I just don't give a rat's ass about letting people like you dictate what other people do and think. It's not your place. It's not your job and it's not your right to insist that everyone thinks like you … period. Now the other side of that coin is you're more than welcome to believe or feel anything you choose to believe or feel. And I would very quickly stand up and tell anyone that you indeed have every right to your own opinions. You have the right to tell me that you feel that I'm selfish or that I'm an asshole or that I'm a jerk. That's not hate speech, that's just your opinion and you're welcome to it. Just as I have the right to counter with my personal opinion. (Facebook, August 5, 2021, ellipses in original, spelling corrected, capitalisation added)

Frank is insisting over and over again on two basic principles—no one should ever tell another what to do—he will not be told, nor will he tell. To justify this position in a pandemic, he also insists that he is not responsible for anyone else's well-being, only his own and his family's. After all, to tell another person what to do can be justified by asserting that people are responsible for how their actions might have unintended consequences and affect others' health, this too Frank rejects. Second, he is not interested in how Judith, or anyone who disagrees with him, understands the world; he is immune to persuasion, and does not want to persuade himself. Refusing to tell anyone what to do, and, in turn, be told what to do, in his case, is about sidestepping any interaction with persuasion.

According to this logic if you choose to mask, it is your prerogative. You simply should not ask anyone else to mask or vaccinate. Even this is not actually how anti-maskers interact with others who were making different decisions around masking: they are equally likely to insult the maskers they come across. But their ire, as Frank says, is focused on being told to mask or vaccinate.

Even if you accept these axioms, it is still possible to decide to mask for someone else's benefit. I came across an example once only; it has not been common in my interviews or social media searches. A store clerk who worked in Target reported an interaction she had early in the pandemic that impressed her. She was helping a customer, and he asked her what she thought of the store's mask mandate. She came out strongly in favour of masks. He nodded, and admitted that he did not think masks did much good at all. Yet he understood that everyone else was anxious. If he wore a mask, he was doing his part to reassure others. Thus he was willing to wear a mask. Here was an example of someone choosing for the common good; it is conceivable in the US that someone will wear a mask he thinks will not actually do anything (either because he did not believe the virus exists, or because he did not believe masks prevent spread) because it eases other people's concerns. It is still, however, someone's choice to mask, and is not, in this framework, an act of obedience.

It is telling that this conversation happened in a store, and that many of the encounters my fieldwork interlocutors told me about occurred in stores, schools or public government buildings—moments dominated by stranger sociality in which people are not bound by contracts with each other. In the United States, without a contract, you have to come up with a moral or legal explanation for why you are following a regulation you would rather ignore. Thinking about whether to act on the common good or not is not

how regulation is typically framed often at work. You either obey and accept regulations to keep your job or you are fired. You are not necessarily explained why this regulation exists or given any sense of the process or debates that led to this regulation being put in place. Also, the regulation is rarely justified in terms of the common good, although this changed during the pandemic.

Employment contracts played a significant role in how Covid-19 protocols are enforced effectively at work. A number of people told me about co-workers who loudly proclaimed that they would refuse to mask even if the company announced a mask mandate. When the company finally insisted on masks on penalty of being fired, everyone complied, even those who ranted previously about how inappropriate this was. For many, work was a space in which they had already agreed to follow many regulations because of their understanding of the employment contract. They might undercut the regulations in small ways, pulling their mask down below their nose and other small forms of resistance. And middle managers did sometimes create pockets of space in which no one was wearing masks if they had the inclination and could get away with it without someone higher up noticing they were not enforcing the mandate. In general, at work, among co-workers, these company mandates could be enforced if those in charge wanted to enforce them.

However, this also means that people are reluctantly making many compromises at work and following regulations that they very much wish they did not have to. This seemed to make all the other moments in which people are not bound by contract that much more charged. If people have to compromise at work and obey Covid-19 protocols, they seemed much angrier outside of work when they are asked to make the same compromises around regulations they consider a violation of their freedom.

To a certain degree, this stance is an extension of a general approach to government regulations: being conservative in the United States has come to mean refusing any hint of new regulation on one's behaviour. This is new. As I mentioned, in my interviews, people often wondered why wearing masks had become such a politically loaded gesture – the majority of Republicans from 10 or 15 years ago would have been willing to wear masks to protect their local community. In the 1990s, Austin Sarat and Roger Bercowitz described liberals and conservatives as fundamentally disagreeing over the relationships between individuals and community. Liberals, in their view, saw the nation as a conglomeration of individuals all pursuing their own interests, with the state intervening to protect this self-interestedness from harming others. 'For civic republicans, individual citizens as well as their communities are constituted through a dialogue about justice.

Political life is a life with others forging commonality through the shared search for virtue' (1998, p. 88).

Needless to say, what being a Republican stands for in the United States has dramatically changed since then. First neoliberalism transformed both the Democratic and Republican parties into left neoliberals and right neoliberals. Left neoliberals believed the market was the best form of spontaneous order but required government regulations of various kinds to ensure the market functioned properly. Part of proper market functioning entailed public education and affordable health care for all, since for the market to sort workers' value properly, people should begin with a level playing field. The right neoliberals had much more faith that the market could function well and efficiently determine value without regulation. More recently, Trump offered a turn away from neoliberalism in rhetoric, if not in practice, by combining an open embrace of white supremacy, a dedicated opposition to any liberal political position, and an autocratic approach to leadership that offered a welcome alternative (to some) from the inadequate democratic pretences of many US workplaces (see Gershon, 2021). For contemporary conservatives, liberals and the government are inappropriately taking an exaggeratedly melodramatic approach to a health problem to extend their power, and sanctimoniously regulate others' behaviour.

What is striking in these moments is how much regulation is divorced from any larger political philosophy in the Trumpian Republican perspective. Regulations are not seen as emerging out of compromises and political negotiation conducted by political representatives in the interests of larger philosophical visions of a better life. Regulations also are not seen as embedding a larger political philosophy; they are simply and only a will to power. This is a different stance than Graeber's frustration with how bureaucracy promises a standardisable form of just distribution and meritocracy and instead only embeds structural violence more thoroughly in everyday interactions (Graeber, 2015). Graeber argues that bureaucracies offer promises that are repeatedly betrayed by actual bureaucratic practice. Trumpian Republicans reject the possibility of such a promise. Frank and others are refusing obligations to others beyond their family, and in doing so, rejecting the social ties that enable relationships across scale, which is precisely what a political theory of relationships offers.

In their 2013 book, *Mundane governance,* Steve Woolgar and Daniel Neyland address how focusing on regulation without political philosophy works in everyday life. They analyse people's experiences of the increased regulation of their use and disposal of ordinary objects; as Graeber also points out, the regulation of everyday life has vastly in-

creased in the past twenty years. There are rules for how we walk down the street, how we throw away trash, how we enter libraries, and on and on. For their case studies, they turn to recycling, airport security, and speed cameras. They begin by arguing that Foucaultian approaches to regulation have been misleading because they presume too much certainty on the part of anyone attempting to enforce government regulations or obey government regulations. Think of all the times you have tried to recycle and been stymied by not knowing how to categorise an object, and thus not knowing what bin to put it in. Woolgar and Nyeland saw that this ontological uncertainty occurred not only in people's homes, but in the recycling centres themselves: different workers had different takes on how various objects should be classified. In general, the objects and actions that people are regulating are uncertain enough that some of the violence embedded in the bureaucracy hinges on who gets to classify in enforceable ways.

Furthermore, this ontological uncertainty around what everyone is regulating is especially true during the pandemic. People do not understand how to think about the virus, or how it spreads. Should you worry about aerosol spread? Surface-to-surface contact? Should you wipe down all your groceries carefully before putting them away? Should library books be quarantined for three to five days before being put back in circulation? Do masks actually protect anyone from spreading the virus, and what kind of masks actually work? Some people might want regulation, but it is hard to decide on which regulation when most people in workplaces do not feel they know enough about what they are regulating. After all, the information circulating around what one should do in the pandemic is constantly changing. In the pandemic, tremendous ontological uncertainty and vast amounts of new regulations go hand in hand.

As Woolgar and Neyland point out, when objects are regulated, it occurs in ways that are difficult to question, let alone protest. If surveys are done to determine the regulations, the survey results are rarely revealed, and the process by which the surveys lead to certain regulations is never clearly laid out. There is no accessible exchange of ideas, no explanation of why this regulation and not another, no whisper of any recourse existing. These are contexts in which control, when it is successfully exerted, happens by undercutting the conditions under which one might need to persuade (by calculatedly withholding information or classifying the need for persuasion away).

In the turn away from neoliberalism to a Trumpian absence of political theory, freedom becomes the ability to refuse any regulation outside of the family and contracts. Thus my interlocutors experienced the American right as interpreting pandemic protocols through the stilted confines of mundane governance. When Tucker Carlson, the famous

Fox far-right commentator, only "asks questions" about vaccination, or when Trump talks about what a referentially vague "they" has supposedly said, both are trafficking in the pragmatic utterances of ontological uncertainty and do so to call into question any attempts to enforce public health regulations. Republicans repeatedly claim in public that refusing to wear masks is a refusal of yet another instantiation of ever-present attempts to regulate and control people's lives through intervening in people's relationships with ordinary objects. Yet this refusal is also resisting seeing regulation and the common good as intertwined. Republicans today are examples of what people's political imagination looks like shaped largely by their responses to mundane control over objects and daily lived practices, a governance stripped bare of earlier legacies of everyday political approaches that engage with the common good or broader social obligations.

Choosing under contract

In the pandemic United States, it is impossible to think through the compromises you are making by going to work with risky co-workers, or refusing to go to work, without having the two stereotypes of the political parties haunting your decisions. Since my 2020 interviews were not with Trumpian Republicans, or with anyone opposed to masking, the people I spoke to were baffled, frustrated, and often very angry with those who did not seem to take the pandemic as a serious enough threat. Some were teaching in schools where the governor and parents were vehemently opposed to mask mandates, some worked alongside anti-maskers, and some had relatives who were anti-maskers. Now, a year later, I might be having similar interviews about some of the anti-vaxxers in people's lives. Not all the workplace decisions that people found too risky are made by Trumpian Republicans who opposed having any Covid-19 restrictions. There is often a legitimate difference of opinion in how risky some practices are and how best to respond to the ontological uncertainty surrounding Covid's spread. Nevertheless, as people are weighing the compromises that they are making and wondering whether they want to continue making them, they also see themselves as part of a nation alongside a large group of fellow citizens who seem opposed to acting in the interests of the common good. This encourages people to think about their own commitments to the common good, in part by committing to being not like Them.

At stake is a form of differentiation through inversion: Trumpian Republicans become a focal point that my fieldwork interlocutors define themselves against in two particular ways. There is any number of reasons to be unhappy with one's workplace, especially during a pandemic, and any number of responses to this misery. This contrast with the

broad stereotype of Trumpian Republicans focuses people's responses. They are actively choosing not to be a certain type of actor, and this constant counterpoint shapes their decisions to stay or leave, as well as shaping how they engage with workplace regulations.

Quitting is on many people's minds. People are working in person during a pandemic, and they are wondering whether the job is worth it. It certainly is not worth anyone's life: if anyone felt absolutely certain that they would die because they were working, they would quit. However, catching Covid-19 is about the odds: some people will die but many will not. Underlying health conditions might be an issue, and so many people I spoke to talked about what previous bodily failures put them or their family more in harm's way or not. Nevertheless, many healthy people have died as well. And then there is the possibility of getting long-term Covid. People are weighing all of these issues against how safe they feel in the workplace.

However, just as many people talked to me about trying to decide whether to quit or not in terms of obligations to other people. Moreover, this crossed gender lines: both men and women are making decisions about their commitments to their workplace, their co-workers, their customers, and their families by weighing their obligations to others. Those who were most conflicted often saw themselves as caught between multiple obligations to others. This made the often implicit contrast with Republicans that much more stark. When people went to work in jobs they thought might be too risky, they did so because of their obligations to other people. When they quit jobs, they did so out of obligation. They view Trumpian Republicans as making similar decisions only in terms of regulations and an antipathy to commands. Meanwhile, their own decisions revolved around obligation and the risks of infecting others.

With Trumpian Republicans in the background, many people talked to me about making decisions based on their relationships with others and their understanding of the obligations that come with these relationships. In the first interview I had about working in person during this pandemic, I talked to a friend in publishing. She was furious—I had never heard her so livid. The CEO of her company was expecting everyone to go back to work in person in the early summer of 2020. There were some concessions to the fact that there was a pandemic going on: the company was divided into two, and some employees only came to work the first half of the week, the others the second half. Workers with children were allowed to work from home. Everyone in the building was expected to wear a mask and sanitise their work areas.

However, this was a publishing company, not a restaurant or a tattoo studio: all the work could easily be done from home, which was the safest option by far. Before the pandemic, that company's employees often had worked from home, so everyone knew how to do so fairly easily; there would not even have been a few weeks of transition as people figured out new workarounds to accommodate working online. So no one understood why the CEO had made this decision. When I asked for the reasons, my friend shrugged (over Zoom) and said maybe the CEO herself preferred working in person. Although it was fairly clear that the CEO probably did not frame this to herself as a matter of personal preference—there might be a better reason, but employees did not know what it was and felt they had little ability to sway this decision.

There were various loopholes to this demand that people come to work, and my friend had been undecided about whether she should take advantage of them. She had an elderly and frail father; she could insist that her eldercare exempted her from working in person and thought that request would probably be granted. However, the truth of the matter was that she was not taking care of her father; she was staying away because of Covid-19 concerns. Others in her family were shouldering the majority of those caregiving demands. At the same time, she also had four people who reported to her directly, and she felt responsible for them. She asked them if they were willing to come into the office, and when they said that they intended to comply, she felt trapped. She ended up deciding to work in-person to support her direct reports; she was going to act out of obligation to specific people whom she was managing.

Many first encounters in fieldwork will contain the themes of what you then keep encountering as you do more fieldwork, and this was no exception. I would come across people making similar types of decisions repeatedly. People are not always deciding to go to work out of a sense of obligation to specific others. Sometimes people decide to quit work because their spouse has some serious underlying health condition that makes catching Covid-19 feel like a possible death sentence. The US American Disability Act (ADA) protects individuals but disregards the ways in which people are part of households, which has become a highly charged problem for many during a global pandemic. Workplaces might grant someone with underlying medical conditions the right to work from home because of ADA requirements, but ADA did not extend to allow you to protect the vulnerable ones you live with in a pandemic. Alternatively, they decided to continue working because they wanted to support their family financially and could not figure out another way to earn money. The decisions are similar in as much as people are deciding to quit or go to work for another person, or a specific group

of people. They do not frame their decisions in terms of self-interest: they are making these decisions based on particular relationships and how they understand their work or familial roles and their obligations to others. The law's focus on the individual is antithetical to the social calculations that people in fact make in these moments.

I talked to many school teachers who quit, or were about to quit, who were struggling with their obligations to specific others. A typical example: Liza had been hired that summer to teach math to elementary students and was surprised to learn that her school was planning to be in-person. It seemed like a risky decision in the fall of 2020, before vaccines were available, to start teaching young children in person in a closed classroom. All the schools in her state had been virtual the spring beforehand, and she happened to be in a state where the Covid surge was so bad that it was front-page news that summer in most national newspapers. If the spring had involved less spread, and schools were virtual then, why would any school administration insist on being in-person when the spread was so discernibly worse in the fall? The first sign of trouble was when she had to go to an in-person orientation for all incoming teachers in her school. She had not been told why the orientation was in-person; this was simply the default. Then when she arrived, she saw that the administrative officials running the orientation were not wearing masks, and several of her fellow teachers were not either. She was new, and so did not feel comfortable making a fuss. She also did not know who to ask about what exactly was going on through back channels. She decided though that she would continue and see how she felt when she was actually in the classroom. After a week in-person, she quit. She realised over the course of those five schooldays that she was so anxious and so unwilling to get close to her students that there was no way that she could be an effective teacher. 'I just I didn't want to stick around for the time when a kid gets sick or a family member gets sick or a staff member gets sick because I just felt that because they weren't following the benchmarks of the state. And if they were even trying to do that, then that would be different.' She realised that the unsafe conditions her school insisted on were undercutting any chance she had of doing her job well. Furthermore, she was not willing to participate, she could not live with the possibility that she would be actively contributing to a system that would lead to Covid-19 infections for her students, their families, or her co-workers.

In many of my interviews, people also thought about these decisions in terms of an implicit social contract. The employment contract underpins people's participation in a workplace; it also structures the kinds of political action people imagine that they can engage in when they are dissatisfied with how the workplace is run. The contract makes

the relationship to the company seem like a relationship based on individual interests and obligations. It is not surprising, thus, that when people chose to uphold or break the contract, they were doing so not out of a sense of obligation to a larger collective but rather because of their relationships to specific people.

In the more than 200 interviews I conducted, the only people who reliably talked about collective action were teachers, in part because they are one of the few who have unions as a ready to hand conceptual model for resisting organisational decisions that are widely seen as threatening workers' well-being. The teachers I talked to did not always have union representation, and they were not always happy with the union representation that they did have. However, teachers' unions clearly cast a long shadow and provided a handy repertoire of collective actions one could conceivably take to be effective. Almost everyone else I talked to found the possibilities of collective action too challenging and too unlikely to even put in that much effort.

Indeed, the collective action that in 2020 was most readily available to Americans was outrage against widespread racism, substantiating David Graeber's insights that both Soviet-era communism and global neoliberal bureaucracies shared much in common. He argued that under communism (and I would say, now in the United States):

> Identity politics was the only kind the bureaucratic apparatus found acceptable … The result was that identity politics not only were seen as legitimate but were in a very real sense the only sort of politics seen as entirely legitimate. (Graeber, 2009, p. 92)

While those I interviewed may not have readily turned to collective action without identity as its basis, they still are trying to find ways to act politically. When people are furious with a boss, angry at the mismanagement of a company, longing for Covid-19 protocols to be enforced, they often start dreaming of quitting as a political action. For many, to break off the contract is to announce loudly that these conditions are morally unacceptable, that at least one person (and hopefully many) find the situation so untenable that they cannot continue. They are often hoping to signal that the contract itself has been broken already by their employers' actions, and leaving is thus only an affirmation of what has already occurred.

The irony of this type of quitting is how hard it is to make visible to others that quitting is a political critique. Gael was deeply dismayed by how his rural Texan elementary school was handling their Covid-19 response, and nothing he said publicly seemed to convince his principal or fellow teachers that this was such a serious threat that they

should ask all the children to mask or consider teaching online. At some point, his principal even decided to meet with him to talk about what she considered his outsized experiences of fear in response to the pandemic and thought he should consider going to therapy. Finally, he decided that quitting might send them the right signal that at least someone in their community thought that this was so urgent that they were willing to take this stand. Yet Gael had trouble figuring out how to make the gesture signal political protest instead of fear. He agreed to continue working until the end of the fall semester until they found his replacement, trusting that his willingness to be present would encourage others to view his decision as taking a stand. He decided that the new job posting would be a strong enough signal to the rest of the community. Indeed, once his job was posted, people contacted him to find out what had actually happened. Nevertheless, he doubted that he was effective. The contract in the United States is so often seen in such individual terms that it is hard to end a contract in protest and have others acknowledge that act as critique instead of viewing it as self-interest.

Regulation's promise

For most people I talked to, regulations seemed to be a social necessity that allowed them to accomplish their goals in otherwise impossible social situations. The pandemic itself has made it far too apparent that regulations are socially constructed, that policies are solidified decisions made and enforced by specific people who could always choose to do otherwise. This may be something that many of us are aware of tacitly, if only because as we move in and out of different social orders, we see similar social interactions regulated in different ways. However, the pandemic makes it much more apparent that the repertoires of behaviour that we usually relied on, the ways things have always been done and the more explicit regulations could be tweaked or ignored: from virtual meetings to eviction moratoriums. This unsettling encourages people to think more carefully about why we have the regulations that we do. For Trumpian Republicans, the answer seems to largely be that all regulation is an exercise of power and an attempt to curtail people's freedom. For their counterparts, regulations have the potential to protect individuals as well as promote the common good. Furthermore, regulations or mandates are often the way out of the social dilemma created by the commonly held American tenet that you cannot tell another person what to do unless you are bound by kinship or contract.

Whenever my interviewees would approach customers who didn't want to mask, they do not tell them 'I don't want to anyone in this store to be infected, and so I want every-

one to mask.' They do not say: 'I am afraid for my life, and would like you to mask.' They say instead: 'This is company policy' or 'I am doing my job by asking you to mask.' When Sarah described being on her company's pandemic protocol committee, she talked about how grateful she was to be in a state that had such clear mandates because she could always tell people that the business was simply following what the state required. Despite being on a committee authorised to develop Covid-19 protocols, she preferred having a state mandate to point to when faced with telling her co-workers how to behave. Time and time again, people who desperately wanted other people to mask and socially distance will insist on this by pointing to a higher institutional authority: a company or a government body. Regulations or mandates serve a strategic purpose, allowing people to tell others what to do in instances when this is otherwise culturally inappropriate. If the act of telling was not so socially fraught, people might not have to rely so heavily on regulation as a strategy to accomplish what they desperately want to occur, which is having everyone minimise potential Covid-19 spread.

Regulations have another appeal; the people I interviewed often turn to regulations to protect themselves from institutional decisions they think are unjust or harmful. When they are told to attend meetings that could result in Covid exposures, and they have underlying health conditions, they argue for ADA protection. When they fail to get the protection that they want, they do not describe the regulations as unjust or designed in such a way to harm them. They describe managers or administrators in an institution who did not apply the regulations fairly, who should have done otherwise but failed to behave well for personal reasons. What is striking in these stories, by contrast to the stereotype of Trumpian Republicans, is how much confidence people appear to have in the possibility of regulations that are fair and could protect the vulnerable. Time and time again they would describe learning about policies or described displaying their expertise with bureaucratic systems, knowing more about the regulations than those making the decisions. Regulations are problems when they were not followed, or when people refused to create sensible Covid-19 protocols. Nevertheless, the fact of regulations is welcome. Moreover, when faced with a problem, they want a regulation that could fix it more often than not.

Conclusion

When the Covid-19 virus landed on US shores, it spread into a country filled with ambivalences over the neoliberal logics and techniques of financialisaton shaping so much of the infrastructure of everyday work. In the United States, employment has been tight-

ly tied to health insurance, and, until the pandemic, working at a permanent job with benefits ensured both economic security and affordable medical care: a headily enforceable social contract. The pandemic forced people in certain jobs to choose between financial security and good health in ways they had never faced before. However, they were doing this in a context shaped by forty years of neoliberal logics and debt, which shaped the kinds of social analyses to which they were likely to turn. Neoliberal logics privilege market order over all others as the best way to coordinate the actions of countless others, and in doing so have undercut any efforts to take the common good as a reason to act. As Graeber has pointed out in much of his work on the inequities of life shaped by neoliberal visions of the world (2009, 2011, 2018), neoliberal logics bind people into unequal social contracts, accompanied by bureaucracies built on the promise of violence. To motivate individual workers into acceding to both the contracts and the bureaucratic regulations, passion for one's work joins debt in a heady attempt to motivate people to take unpleasant jobs and discipline people. The schismogenetic dance that Americans are in at the moment exists in the wake of decades of neoliberal capitalism's efforts to undermine most senses of ethical commitments to others in workplaces, deriding company loyalty and trying to replace community or national allegiances with market-based commitments (see Gershon 2021).

Both pro-maskers and Trumpian Republicans are rejecting aspects of neoliberal logics during the pandemic but not the same aspects. Pro-maskers are speaking more often and more openly in terms of Enlightenment models of social contracts and the common good in general. They were also placing tremendous hope in bureaucracies and policies, keeping faith that regulations could create shared safe practices in moments when nothing else seemed to work. Meanwhile, Trumpian Republicans, at least as their pro-masking co-workers and service providers understand them, refuse the validity of regulations, even the regulations that would make it possible for businesses to flourish. After all, it is hard to keep stores and restaurants open when people are afraid that they will get infected by going shopping or eating out. They also reject experts' authority, while neoliberal logics tend to privilege a certain form of expert intervention (Gershon, 2011). If they vaccinate and if enough widespread vaccination occurs—and as I type this, it is very uncertain—it will likely be because businesses are requiring their workers to vaccinate. The contract continues to be the most reliable inducement that Americans have in a cultural moment where it is so highly charged to tell another person what to do (even if it might save lives).

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Anderson, E. (2017). *Private government: How employers rule our lives (and why we don't talk about it)*. Princeton University Press.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chandler Publishing Company.

De Stefano, V. (2019). "Negotiating the algorithm": Automation, artificial intelligence, and labor protection. *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal, 41*(1), 15-46. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3178233

Gershon, I. (2011). Neoliberal agency. *Current Anthropology, 52*(4), 537-555. doi: https://doi.org/10.1086/660866

Gershon, I. (2021). Trump's Appeal: Choosing Autocracy over the Committee. *General Anthropology, 28*(2), 3-5. doi: https://doi.org/10.17613/frbx-4506

Gerson, M. (2021, December 6). How is the GOP's coronavirus recklessness compatible with being pro-life?. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/06/how-is-gops-coronavirus-recklessness-compatible-with-being-pro-life/

Graeber, D. (2001). *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams*. Palgrave.

Graeber, D. (2009). Neoliberalism, or the bureaucratization of the world. In H. Gusterson & C Besteman (Eds.). *The insecure American: How we got here and what we should do about it* (pp. 79-96). University of California Press.

Graeber, D. (2011). *Debt: The first 5,000 years*. Melville House.

Graeber, D. (2013). On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs: A work rant. *Strike Magazine, 3,* 1-5.

Graeber, D. (2015). *The utopia of rules: On technology, stupidity, and the secret joys of bureaucracy*. Melville House.

Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs*. Penguin.

Greenhouse, C. J. (2010). Introduction. In C. J. Greenhouse (Ed.). *Ethnographies of neoliberalism* (pp. 1-12). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Macaulay, S. (1986). Private government. In L. Lipson & S. Wheeler (pp. 445-518). *Law and social science.* Russell Sage Foundation.

Sarat, A., & Berkowitz, R. (1998). Disorderly differences: Recognition, accommodation, and American law. In C. Greenhouse (Ed.). *Democracy and ethnography: Constructing identities in multicultural liberal states* (pp. 81-102). State University of New York.

Tomassetti, J. (2020, November 19). *Power in the employment relationship: Why contract law should not govern at-will employment*. Economic Policy Institute. https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/the-legal-understanding-and-treatment-of-an-employment-relationship-versus-a-contract/

Woolgar, S., & Neyland D. (2013). *Mundane governance: Ontology and Accountability*. Oxford University Press.

Povzetek

V tem poklonu Davidu Graeberju se obračam na izkušnje Američanov z osebnim delom med pandemijo kot etnografsko lečo za razumevanje, kako se delavci odzovejo, ko so implicitne družbene pogodbe kršene in ko se izpodbijajo ideje o skupnem dobrem. Ker so zvezna vlada Združenih držav in vlade mnogih držav zavrnile vzpostavitev ustreznih protokolov o pandemiji, so podjetja postala vir ureditve pandemije v Združenih državah. Med pandemijo so se Američani jasno zavedali tihih družbenih pogodb, ki oblikujejo njihove obveznosti na delovnem mestu. Na podlagi Graeberjevega vpogleda, da je v središču dela kompleksna teorija pogodbe in menjave, raziskujem, kako pogodbena družbenost oblikuje razumevanje Američanov o političnih možnostih, ki so jim na voljo pri delu. Posebej se osredotočam na ikono Trumpovega republikanca in na to, kako se drugi Američani odzivajo na zgodovinsko utemeljene vizije skupnega dobrega. Na splošno članek raziskuje, kaj je pandemija razkrila o politični domišljiji Američanov, o tem, kako vladati in biti vodeni na delovnem mestu, z graeberjanskim poudarkom na vlogi, ki jo pogodbena družbenost igra pri strukturiranju te domišljije.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pandemija, delovna mesta, zasebna vlada, skupno dobro, družbene pogodbe

CORRESPONDENCE: ILANA GERSHON, University of Indiana, the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Anthropology, Student Building 130, 701 E. Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405-7100, USA. E-mail: igershon@indiana.edu