

The Road To Hell Is Paved With Good Intentions

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Other Terms, Other Conditions: A NatureCulture Blog Series

This conversation started in February 2020 with an email from Endre, shortly after the two of us participated in a writing retreat.

Onderwerp: On Other Terms - in Prague!

Dear Jeannette,

This is a quick email to see if you'd be interested in continuing some of our conversations in a wider circle? Attached I send

you the Table of Contents and the Introduction to Annemarie & John's new

book, *On Other Terms*. We're thinking of proposing a panel for the 4S/EASST conference in Prague, and would be delighted to have you involved!

Hope to see you again in August, if not earlier!

With best wishes,

Endre

The rest is history. The Corona virus flooded the world, and for the rest of 2020 we were locked up in our respective homes, in the Netherlands and Germany. The Prague conference took place online, but the panel mentioned in the email never materialised. Still, the conversation that was triggered by Endre's chapter on 'búskomor politics' in Annemarie Mol and John Law's *On Other Terms* book continued online. Moreover, the Covid crisis added to the urgency to discuss it.

Endre: [In my chapter](#) in *On Other Terms*, I write about the sorry state of democratic institutions in Hungary, imploding under Viktor Orbán's illiberal government. The situation is rather grim: in the past ten years or so right-wing populism in Hungary has gradually undermined 'politics as we know it', well before the election of Donald Trump or the Brexit referendum. If there is any hope, it is a melancholy one – this is what in my chapter I call 'búskomor politics'. The term denotes a certain kind of politics that seeks to do something about worrisome situations without assuming that there is a clear path to improvement, or that interventions turn out exactly as

planned. Liberal democracy cannot be restored in Hungary overnight, even if the current government is voted out of power in the next general election. I therefore propose a shift of attention to subversive practices that might make life more bearable for those who have fallen victim to Orbán's regime. Refugees, for instance, hoping to start a new life in the European Union – the list is long.

Jeannette: The piece resonates with [my project](#) on improvement-as-a-practice. The idea is that, in the care practices attending to people with chronic diseases I study, people strive to achieve something good, without being able, or even desiring, to eradicate disease. The problems will not go away but have to be, somehow, lived with. Hence, aims to improve are attempts rather than clear roads to a happy end. These attempts are interesting to study. People keep trying to improve things, even if there is no guarantee of success. What are the effects of these attempts? Caregivers, for example, introduce technologies that may support a better life for their patients with their disease. But such practices rarely lead to the expected results. For instance, technologies are often promoted as supporting the 'self-management' of patients. However, this glosses over the way technologies translate peoples' goals and turn them into something else entirely. The most unexpected practice of patients was to do measurements at home, but leaving their interpretation and the consequences entirely to the nurses. They reported feeling safe by being looked after so well – and not having to manage themselves. Or caregivers try to make their intellectually disabled clients autonomous, which leads them to shut the door in their clients' faces. By studying improvement *as a practice*, I want to learn more about attempts to improve something, to make situations better. What ways are there to improve? What effects do they have? And are there ways to 'improve improvement'?

And so, our exchange continued.

'Improvement' was not a term to Endre's liking. He thought its connotations were about linearity and fixing things towards a clear goal. He actually wanted to euthanise the term by drowning it in empirical examples of its impossibility. But so far this did not happen – a lack of alternative words, as well as a love of irony, kept the concept for the time being.

Then Jeannette wrote: I think your problem with improvement emerges when you say: liberal democracy is in a bad state (so let's improve it). My thinking starts more with *situations*; 'this is a bad situation (e.g. [the refugees' hunger strike in Brussels](#), [the border burners in the piece by Amade](#), [the chronic patients in my research](#),

so let's see what we can do differently to make it at least a little bit better.' This is more about informal and uncertain ways of attempting to change something for the better, knowing that the result will never be perfect, nor according to plan.

To be sure, such subversive practices could be done in a melancholic or a cheerful mood, or even in a way that according to Endre could be described as 'celebrating with tears', [which is] an expression in Hungarian: 'sírva vigad a magyar', literally 'Hungarians celebrate cryingly' (if that's a word in English).

Jeannette: Dutch equivalents could be: to do things 'tegen beter weten in' (while being sure that it will not achieve what you want) or, in a more fatalist way, 'vechten tegen de bierkaai' (to fight against the beer-quay – I have no idea what a beer-quay is, nor how one could attempt to fight against it, but that may be part of its appeal!),¹ or 'dweilen met de kraan open' (mopping while the is tap open). Clearly, the exchange is not only about moods, but also about how to do something about a situation that can never become what one would hope. We have to live with bad things while simultaneously trying to make the best of it.

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Our initial exchange was lost in the chaos of Covid and the ways in which national governments have responded to it. To be sure, the situations have been different in different countries, but we noticed that the pandemic has foregrounded some general concerns with liberal democracy as a model of governance. The very *terms* associated with democratic politics, we feel, are at stake. This relates mainly to the idea that, according to mainstream democracy theory, we live in a ['one world' world](#), which suggests that, no matter how different our perspectives are, if we put arms aside and subject our assumptions to the test of truth, justice and authenticity, we should be able to find [a common ground](#). In other words, we should be able to find some kind of consensus on what we are dealing with and what needs to be done about it.

This idea falters in at least two ways. First, under the usual labels of post-truth, alternative facts, and fake news. Donald Trump is of course the emblematic figure here. His insistence that he was re-elected in 2020, even if the facts told us differently, captures exactly what he had been trying to do all along: re-define the world

¹ [Wikipedia](#) says that this proverb, which signifies 'trying to achieve the impossible', refers to a quay in Amsterdam (de Bierkade), where inhabitants had once been invincible fighters – one could never win against them.

in terms that are suitable to him, even if those terms do not stand up to conventional modes of verification. The world is supposed to 'be different because he wants it to be different, and his words have particular performative effects to *create* such a world. No matter how open and free a democratic dialogue would be, if we had the chance to engage in it with him, never-ever would we be able to reach a sense of being in the same world.

This argument resonates with what many [STS scholars and cultural anthropologists](#) have been teaching all along: there is a multiplicity of worlds and practices that cannot be reduced to one another. If multiple worlds and practices appear to be singular, it is a fragile achievement. We might want to fight such singularities or protect them, but we cannot take them for granted. Or, to put it somewhat differently, we cannot assume that they precede democratic politics.

There is, however, another – rather more practical-material – attack on democratic politics at the moment: the pandemic itself and the ways in which governments have responded to it across the globe. Both the virus and governments forbid us to get together. At the time of writing, we simply cannot go to coffeehouses or libraries; we are not welcome in our offices, and have to limit our visits to one another in our homes (if at all permitted by the state). The material infrastructures to gather have been suspended, making it impossible to hang out and behave like 'political beings' or as a *demos* in the classical, deliberative sense, now marked as spittle-hence-virus-disseminating gathering. Digital solutions are rapidly developing, but, as the Covid crisis also shows, it is not so easy to re-create 'the social' with digital means.

Jeannette: Indeed, it seems we're experiencing a double crisis, one concerned with the impossibility of sharing a singular world, and another with the inability to get together. But is this analysis correct? Is it also possible to argue that '[the stuff politics is made of](#)' has once again changed? We may not be able to meet the way we used to, but we are gathering through newspaper stories and digital social media. We go to supermarkets and take walks in parks. We meet different people in different ways. The materiality of Covid is also a materiality that is undeniably part of our lives, even if its workings are not always clear, nor the usual ways to approach it. There are many practices we cannot share, but there are new ones in the making. Melancholically, for sure. And they don't work so well – at least not yet. But we persistently tinker to try to make it work. For instance, at the University of Amsterdam we organise online writing sessions and discussions. We re-create 'coffee machine talks' by chatting in threes before the meeting starts. Computers and laptops

have been distributed to children who need to follow online education, but don't have the equipment. It turned out to be very difficult to have experiences of socially hanging out, getting together without any predefined goals and set agendas. But people are inventing online board games and online cooking events. Artists are out of jobs, as they cannot gather with their audiences, but they are inventing new ways of connecting through different online formats.

Endre: I really appreciate these interventions, but somehow I'm not sure about ending our exchange this way. I suppose it sounds too hopeful or optimistic for my taste. What about the global competition for new vaccines (guess who is going to miss out...)? What about the poverty that awaits the world after the lockdown? What about, as you have shown in your research on Covid policy and effects on vulnerable groups, people who die alone? Older people locked up at home, slowly withering away? Children confined to small flats without balconies? Gaps in intellectual and social development? Fear of people in the streets? What about climate change – will it be addressed differently, in light of our lockdown experience? These concerns are not going to go away any time soon... Is it possible to rethink the terms of liberal democratic politics with these concerns in mind – not, as Orbán and Trump have tried, by forcefully imposing their made-up terms on reality, but by foregrounding practices that are already political, if differently?

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How powerless is this tinkering towards so many different goods that are always beyond the horizon when we are, no matter what, on the road to hell? Is this something to get lethargic about? Or keep on striving, tears and all? Write hybrid texts with somebody in a different mood about the world? Can we be interested in practices of 'the good' in a bad world? When is it better to focus on 'the bad'? Could we do both?

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