

“Always With an Eye to the Great Return”: Normalcy, Democracy, and the anti-Vietnam War Movement

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Following the election of Donald Trump, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the January 6th Capitol insurrection—a period characterized by crisis and flagging democratic norms and institutions—American political elites summoned “normalcy” as the bulwark of liberal democracy. Against the pugnacious political ideologies of the right, the liberal’s invocation of normalcy strikes one as decidedly cool-headed, non-combative, non-partisan. Set against the fiery machinations of a figure like Trump, and the anti-democratic projects of right-wing populism and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, the appeal of normal times is the escape from political agitation itself: normalcy offers stasis, comfort, predictability, rationality. Amid a regime of normalcy, the key pillars of the political order enjoy consensus, go uncontested, perpetuate forward. Normal times are quiet times. But what are the ideological underpinnings of normal politics that this approach to defending democracy commits us to? Are there risks to meeting the threats posed to democracy not with arguments for a more democratic future, but with appeal to a past normalcy? And how have democratizing movements in American politics grappled with the lure of normal politics in contexts that demanded a politics of resistance, disobedience, and radical action?

This chapter explores these questions, turning to the American antiwar movement during the Vietnam War era for resources to rethink our investment in normal politics. The first section of the chapter unpacks the contours of contemporary normalcy discourse in American politics, particularly since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, stressing the tensions between normalcy

and resistance as anti-MAGA postures during this period. The second part of the chapter offers a political theory of normalcy and its cognates in the Western tradition, distilling the ways in which normal politics is not only a fixation of the contemporary moment, but a longstanding, undertheorized, and anti-democratic theme in Western political theory, and crucial to understanding the modern nation-state. The third section turns to the American anti-Vietnam War movement, and particularly the activism of Daniel Berrigan and the Catonsville Nine, to show how the movement attempted to disrupt American normalcy in resisting the Vietnam War, but also developed critical insights about our attraction to normal politics, placing our contemporary reliance on normalcy as a safeguard of liberal democracy in sharp relief. Refashioning the insights of the American antiwar movement, this chapter argues that normal politics undermines democracy even when, or perhaps especially when, it presents as a seemingly self-evident defense of liberal democracy.

I: Normalcy Discourse in the MAGA Era of American Politics:

The ubiquity of appeals to normalcy in American political discourse is striking, serving as an all-purpose rhetorical tool, particularly for centrists and liberals expressing criticism of the conservative and MAGA politics of the post-Trump Republican Party. As a candidate for President in 2020, Joseph Biden framed his appeal to voters in terms of normalcy (Halloway 2021). While Biden didn't use the word normal in his inaugural address, he defined the work of democracy as a returning: "Much to repair. Much to restore. Much to heal," Biden said (Biden 2021). Normalcy also became the gauge Biden used in issuing critiques of institutions and adversaries. In response to a sling of precedent-breaking Supreme Court rulings, including

overturning abortion rights and Affirmative Action policies, President Biden's primary criticism of the Court was that it is "not a normal court" (Sheer 2023). Barack Obama, too, has reached for normalcy in describing democracy's peril: "This is not normal. These are extraordinary times, and they are dangerous times," Obama said in a 2018 speech rebuking then President Trump (Paschal 2018). For Democratic politicians, this normalcy anti-Trump strategy persisted well through the losing 2024 Presidential campaign that saw Trump re-elected. In the summer of 2024, Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota catapulted to the Vice-Presidential nomination of the Party by brandishing a newfangled rhetorical iteration of the Democrats' claim to normalcy: Trump and MAGA Republicans were "weird," Walz proclaimed, hoping Americans would elect the normies (Burkey 2024).

Liberal pundits have also drawn upon normalcy as diagnostic tool, measuring the ill health of American democracy by its drift from normal. The liberal *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, for example, has written lamentedly of the "widespread sense that politics just isn't normal anymore" (Dionne, Jr. 2023). For Dionne, as for Biden and Obama, normalcy serves as a commonsensical lens to alert us to what is off kilter or illiberal about our politics: conspiracies about voter fraud, debt ceiling antics in Congress, book banning, political violence and intimidation, and so on—these practices are purportedly not normal. Likewise, an editorial in *The New York Times* headlined "The Promise and Peril of the 'Normal' Politician" concluded by pleading for a return to the supposed cool pragmatism and problem-solving ethos of American politics: "Our lives are exciting enough. Our politics shouldn't be" (Coasten 2023). And the liberal comedian, Bill Maher, satirized that it is time for "America to go back on its meds," as though the American politics had always been clearheaded. For Maher, as for most devotees of

normal politics, normalcy ought to be America's new creed not only because a normal politics can redeem our democracy, but because it vanquishes ideological division: "The battle for the soul of this country," says Maher, "isn't Right or Left, its normal versus crazy" (Maher 2024).

Not surprisingly, while pragmatists, centrists, and liberals have turned to normalcy as a manner of transcending ideological conflict, normalcy has in fact become a subject of political contestation, integrating into the very ideological conflicts some liberals hoped it would dissipate. It is not at all clear to conservatives that a normal politics buttresses a liberal agenda (Rothman 2023; McLaughlin 2022). Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, in railing against the critical teaching of race and gender on campuses and in schools, has framed his agenda in terms of normalcy: "We seek normalcy, not philosophical lunacy," said DeSantis in his second inaugural address (Salam 2023). The conservative Heritage Foundation saw an opening too: "Normalcy and its Enemies" read its webpage's editorial blog, linking a normal politics to a host of conservative priorities from anti-immigration policies to parental rights in education to anti LGBTQ+ initiatives. "A very American, and very conservative, word may soon find its way back into the political lexicon: normalcy," the Heritage Foundation happily submitted (Gonzalez 2023). Even conservatives and Republicans critical of the MAGA agenda found recourse in normalcy discourse. Arizona's Republican Senator, Jeff Flake, took to the Senate floor in 2018 to chastise Trump's unseemly behavior, intoning that "none of this is normal" (Lueders 2018). Indeed, *The Atlantic* magazine ran a piece on "The Revenge of Normal Republicans," quoting Texas Republican Congressman Will Hurd saying, "Most people aren't nuts. They want to solve problems...they are normal people who want normal leaders" (Alberta 2022).

Another iteration of normalcy discourse was generated by the social, political, and public health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public opinion gravitated towards a “return to normal” as the desired endpoint of the pandemic, with poll after poll gauging Americans’ position on “going back” to the routine of pre-pandemic life (Jackson 2022; Tuccille 2022; Edwards-Levy 2023). Meanwhile, dissenting voices on the left cast the COVID-19 pandemic as a productive disruption of normalcy. The normal order was not something to hurry back to, but a longstanding mask of power inequalities that the pandemic had revealed anew, opening alternative futures. Headlines in the socialist magazine, *Jacobin*, read “The Last Thing We Need Is To ‘Go Back to Normal’” (Burgis 2020). “We need a real ambition,” another *Jacobin* piece read, “but the ambition to return to normality within capitalism is surely no ambition at all” (Penner 2022). Universal basic income, the cancellation of student debt, flexible work schedules, police reform, eviction moratoriums, and a more expansive framework for disability rights, were all progressive policy priorities briefly experimented with at the height of the public response to the pandemic that soon drowned in the rush back to normal (Uwan 2020; Uwan 2021; Rosenthal and Parra 2021; Cain Miller 2022; Wildman 2022). Perhaps the pandemic’s most important journalist, Ed Yong, best captured the enervation on the left in the face of the seductiveness of normalcy, asking in the pages of *The Atlantic*, “How did this many deaths become normal?” (Yong 2022).

Just how deeply saturated American life is in normalcy discourse, and how fully the nation’s horizon of possibility has been reduced to normalcy’s return, can be gleaned from the ways it embeds in everyday sensibilities, where its politics operates subliminally, below the threshold of ideological consciousness, as a matter of fact, commonsense reference point. Consumer culture

is awash in normalcy appeals, particularly in moments of perceived crisis, as brands market their products as portals to the familiar comforts of everyday life (Sobande and Klein 2023; Goode, et al., 2022). When popular attention turns to the economy, normalcy is also our metric of success and stability. The chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisors, for example, explains persistent price inflation as a departure from “economic normality,” simultaneously suggesting its immanent return as a balm to an anxious public (Tankersley 2023). Even dimensions of collective experience that are decidedly not normal in the sense of being unprecedented, extraordinary, and unconventional are often assimilated to normalcy, desensitizing us their novelty, as we search for the “new normal” of collective life (Blumler and Coleman 2021). The Governor of New York, for example, refers to climate disasters and extreme weather as “our new normal” while studies suggest that it takes as little as two years for most people to accept climate disasters as “normal” (Gelles 2023). A similar dynamic has unfolded with government shutdowns: “To Many Americans, Government Dysfunction is the New Normal,” reports *The New York Times* (Baker 2023).

Amid this pervasiveness of normalcy discourse, a few historically minded commentators paused to note that there is no normalcy to return to, American politics was never normal: the assumptions made about the *longue durée* American democracy by normalcy’s advocates suffer from historical amnesia (Baker 2018; Bernhard and O’Neill 2018; Walsh 2020; Essegbey et al 2021; Jurecic 2023).). Though true, pointing to the historical inaccuracies of normalcy discourse is a criticism that misfires in important respects, overlooking normalcy’s enduring rhetorical power. Summons to normalcy are never merely empirical or historical claims. Rather, a normal politics imperceptibly weaves together a claim about the value of stasis with an understanding of

what is ideal, of what we have a right to hope for. Put another way, a normal politics collapses the familiar and the desirable, it enmeshes the routine and the possible, it entangles the ordinary and the imagination, always to the latter's detriment and domestication. The price paid for the security of normal politics is the surrender of an alternative political vision. Normalcy is a political agenda that does not reveal itself as such: cloaked by the inducements of comfort and calm, a normal politics doesn't bear the hallmarks of political argument, agitation, or persuasion, even as it constructs a citizenry's longings, narrowing the frame of what we might imagine to be our political future.

We are now able to discern the tensions and ambivalences inherent in the pragmatic-liberal response to the threat posed by the MAGA movement and the Trump presidency. Normalcy discourse was a pillar of that response: "2016 Isn't Normal" was the headline in *U.S. News*; "Welcome to Washington's New Normal: One Trump Drama After Another" read the *Washington Post*; "Don't Let Trump Become the New Normal" pleaded the *Guardian*; the *New Yorker* and the *Boston Globe* highlighted the word "normalization" as their word of the year in 2016, responding to various unprecedented abnormalities of American politics under Trump, fearing those abnormalities might soon become the new normal; and the Twitter hashtag #NotNormal became a popular manner of critically documenting the Trump presidency on social media (Stephens 2021). The loss of normal politics is a primary way Americans digested and critically assessed Trumpism.

This sat uncomfortably with another response and a contrasting Twitter hashtag: #TheResistance. "The Resistance" was a compilation of individuals and movements opposing the policies and

ideas of the Trump administration, from the activists who organized the Women's March, seeking to defend reproductive rights, to establishment figures in the Republican Party who sought to sustain the integrity of key governmental institutions. "The Resistance" as a moniker hearkened back to a tradition of resistance movements, beginning with the movement to abolish slavery in the 19th century, that deliberately aimed at subverting the norms and institutions of American life. Indeed, the words "resist" and "resistance" have acquired a meaning in Western political thought entailing a politically legitimate or necessary disruption of normal order: John Locke's theory of the dissolution of government, Henry David Thoreau's theory of civil disobedience, the French underground movement opposing German fascism, and the American anti-Vietnam War movement are all contexts in which "resist" or "resistance" have been invoked as the organizing principle of political activism (Lynd and Ferber 1971).

In other words, "resistance" has classically entailed subversive political thought that envisages an alternative, more democratized future, and radical political action that pressures conventional political institutions. By contrast, #TheResistance and #NotNormal cohabited comfortably with one another; "The Resistance" to Trump was a rearguard movement aimed at defending extant norms, practices, and settled expectations in political life; "This is not normal!" as the rallying cry of "the resistance" was an attempt to put disobedience in the service of comity, to authorize dissent on behalf of calm, to do resistance as a restoration. Resistance politics was curtailed by normalcy discourse, surrendering its ability to de-familiarize the present, to de-legitimize conventional politics, to anticipate new a new politics.

In this way, normalcy was the controlling retort to MAGA, not resistance. Normalcy's key equivocation was that it did its work adjacent to MAGA's ideological terrain: nostalgia. MAGA was powerful because it looked back to the halcyon days of yore, to a pristine American regime, to hierarchy, order, and national glory. Normalcy looked backward too, but without a matching emotional pull, without the longing and affective attachment of nostalgia.

This was a mistake for a couple of reasons. First, it is not clear that Americans yearn for the normalcy of prototypical Presidential speeches, unrepresentative elections, the Senate filibuster, the Electoral College, an undemocratic Supreme Court, typically fickle politicians, corporate news media, standard wages, income inequality, and expensive health care—all elements of the actually existing, pre-packaged American democracy that the normalcy retort boxed the anti-MAGA movement into defending. Second, the normalcy retort committed the anti-MAGA movement to an understanding of the state and of citizenship that is anti-democratic in key respects, and stems from a discontent with liberal democracy within modern political thought. This is an especially vexing point because the virtue of normalcy was said to be its ability to defend liberal democracy against the authoritarian impulses of the right, and yet its textual and political lineage shares some of those very impulses and forecloses the resistance politics that have been crucial to development of liberal democracy in America.

To see this, we turn to charting normalcy's undergirding political theory before revisiting the antiwar movement's critique of normalcy during the Vietnam War era.

II: A Political Theory of Normalcy:

Scholars of political thought have given normalcy only passing attention (Bandopadhyay 2022; Bromwich 2004; Connolly 1995, 90-93). Normalcy has primarily drawn the attention of scholars of disability, race, and sexuality. (Davis 1995; Warner 1999; Cryle and Stephens 2017; Krutzsch 2019). This scholarship notes that the etymology of the words “normal,” “normalcy,” “normality,” “norm,” and “abnormal” is of recent origin. It is only in the mid 19th century that the word enters the English language, with its usage becoming more widespread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Scholars of disability and sexuality have grappled with normalcy because of its provenance in the development of medical science and public health, particularly with the application of statistics to the human body, beginning in the 1830s and 40s. Within 19th century statistics, the “norm” was a word that denoted average, and as applied to medical science, the average human body or health outcome. The influential French statistician Adolphe Quetelet, for example, developed a notion of “social physics” in 1835, applying statistics to the human body and constructing the idea of the “average man” (Davis 1995, 24-26).

In this historical provenance of the statistically average human, the concept of normalcy presupposed deviation and defect. Indeed, statistics is guided by the idea that a population can be “normed.” But the statistical norm is not an uninterested empirical marker. Scholars note that the one of the antecedents to normal in the English language is “ideal”: a preferred state of affairs, a normatively desirable outcome, a value judgment. One of the tricky aspects of the concept of normal, which likely accounts for its usefulness in many contexts, is its ability to slide between description and prescription, to simultaneously characterize what is generally true (the norm) and

what we ought to hope for (normalcy), to at once invoke what is standard and what is worthy (Davis 1995, 24; Cryle and Stephens 2017, 1-2).

The concept of a “normal curve” in statistics, referring to a specific cluster of data points in the middle of a range, doesn’t emerge until the late 19th century, but already in Quetelet’s 1835 formulation of the “average man,” one sees the slippage between the norm as descriptive and normalcy as prescriptive. For Quetelet, the individual body was always a deviation from an archetype, an error of the average human. That average represented the truth about the human body against which the individual could be measured (Rose 2016). This notion of a standard human, fueled by the norms and averages invoked by statisticians, played an important role in the eugenics movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The British eugenicist, Francis Galton, to whom the term is often credited, theorized such statistical terms as the “normal curve” and “normal distribution” in studying heredity, gender, and race with an eye toward social improvement (Cryle and Stephens 2017, 12-13). Likewise, the study of comparative anatomy in France, beginning in the 1820s, refers to the concept of the “normal state” in describing the typical, healthy human form. Later in the century, French physical anthropologists injected this study of normality with a focus on racial or hereditary characteristics as the basis for measuring and categorizing human bodies (Cryle and Stephens 2017, 16-17).

The study of normal, and the mitigation of undesirable, “abnormal” human traits and behaviors, is at the taproot of fields such as medicine, public health, statistics, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. Under the guise of neutral scientific observation and the careful gathering of statistical data, normalcy became eugenicists’ framework for rubberstamping a racialized, ideal

human type, framing deviations from normal in objective, statistical language that nevertheless made clear who the deviants and defectives were (Carter 2007). As the study of normalcy imperceptibly mixed observational neutrality with cultural ideals, it became an effective instrument for confirming hierarchy and maintaining order, while simultaneously softening or occluding the political dimensions of that oppression, lending political power the air of natural inevitability, scientific validity, and everyday ordinariness. And because normalcy was synonymous with white, able-bodied, and heterosexual, already stigmatized communities were vulnerable to the “norming” correctives prescribed by eugenics.

By the mid-20th century America that anti-Vietnam War era activists came of age in, normalcy discourse had migrated from the professional scientific discourses of the 19th century to 20th century popular discourse and mass culture. Consistent with normalcy’s oscillation between scientific observation and cultural idealization, the “normal American” was cast at the dawn of the post-World War II era as both as a self-evident component of national strength and as an exemplary standard all citizens ought to aspire to: the “normal American” was simultaneously the “ideal American.” America had entered a post-War period of national triumph, empire building, and civilizational mission—the Cold War leader of the “free world,” the defender of Western “civilization” against Godless Communism. Normal had become the undergirding of American patriotism. America was normal in the sense that, unlike the blood-and-soil nationalism of Europe that had mired the continent in World War, the United States abided the commonsensical, self-evident principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. America was united not by ancient religious zeal or ethnic national heritage, but by pragmatism in politics and productivity in economics. Indeed, the America of the post-War period was poised to have a

“normalizing” effect on Europe. America had normal “patriotism” compared with Europe’s revanchist nationalism.

Normalcy discourse also served as a framework for articulating the virtues of the average American citizen. In 1945, for example, a scientific exhibit entitled “A Portrait of the American People” debuted at the Cleveland Health Museum introducing “Norma” and “Normman”: perfectly sculpted constructions of the average modern American male and female, aged 18-20. The exhibit demonstrated normalcy’s etymological lineage in medicine, physical anthropology, and statistics. Gone were the explicitly racialized themes of the eugenics movement. After all, America was rebranding as a global Cold War defender of democracy and African American veterans were returning home from the Second World War with civil rights on their mind. Yet, the exhibit used normalcy to document improvement generationally in the average American’s body metrics, health, and vigor, employing an evolutionary timeline that mirrored America’s emergence as a global power from 19th to the 20th century, showcasing smaller and less robust models from the Victorian period. A news story on the exhibit in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* was entitled “Norma’s Husband Better Be Good: Evolution Outlook Bright if Model Girl Weds Wisely.” The article quoted a biologist saying that with “proper selection in matrimony” future generations would “keep on improving physically and mentally.” Clearly, the normal (ideal) American was productive, healthy, white, heterosexual, and interested in marriage and family, not only for themselves, but for the betterment of their nation (Carter 2007, 10-11).

The crucial parallel at work in this history of normalcy is that between the normal body and the normal citizen. What lurks behind the appeal of normalcy, then, is the state’s interest in a certain

kind of citizenry, or what the history of political thought has referred to as the “body politic” (Alexandra 1989; Neocleous 2001; Mill 2011). Indeed, though the word normal emerges in the professionalized discourses of 19th century statistics, anthropology, and medicine, it does not emerge devoid of political context or state interest. The word *statistik* was first used in 1749 to denote compiling information regarding the state (Davis 1995, 26). And as the field of statistics developed in 1830s England, for example, it was organized and implemented by the state. A General Registrar Office was created in 1837 to collect all vital statistics related to the Reform Act of 1832 and the Poor Law of 1834, and other modernizing measures in which the state sought to govern, monitor, and administer to the people (Davis 1995, 29-30). The political salience of normalcy is thus coterminous with the development of popular sovereignty in the 19th century and driven by the state’s imperative to manage its population. Though the word normalcy is relatively new, the political anxiety it speaks too is acute in the modern era, and inextricable from the modern state, and the normal functioning of the modern polity.

The earliest and most influential theorist of the modern state, Thomas Hobbes, offers insight into modernity’s understanding of a normal “body politic.” The cover piece of Hobbes’s canonical 1651 text on the modern state, *Leviathan*, depicts a prodigious political head of state, the “Leviathan,” brandishing a sword and specter, symbolic of the power of the state. The Hobbesian monarch’s corporeality is composed of the individual subjects of the state: “the people” compose the body of the monarch. In this way, Hobbes’s text defined the modern “body politic” visually much the way “Portrait of the American People” depicted the models of the normal American citizens, “Norma” and “Normman”: Hobbes’s modern “body-politic” is strong, fit, and coordinated, not so dissimilar from ideal human body indexed by the statisticians who first used

the word normal in the 19th century. In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes uses bodily metaphors to outline the constituent features the modern state, emphasizing the state's qualities as a single constructed being. "For by Art is created," Hobbes writes, "that great Leviathan called a Common-wealth, or State...which is but an Artificiall Man" (Hobbes 1985, 81).

As the human body persists in a state of homeostasis when in normal health, so too with the Hobbesian body politic of the modern state. Hobbes was motivated by the English civil wars of the 1600s, at one point fleeing to Paris for his safety. The *Leviathan* was "occasioned by the disorders of the present time," Hobbes writes in the tract's conclusion (Hobbes 1985, 728). Thus, Hobbes's theory of the modern state puts a premium on peace and order, offering a political formulation for a self-perpetuating sovereign power that could make peace permanent, or, we might say, normal. One of Hobbes's effective rhetorical maneuvers in *Leviathan* is to tether his political theory of the well-ordered modern state to the individual desire for normalcy, even if he never invokes the word. For Hobbes's theory to work, he must demonstrate that the perpetual sovereign arises as a consequence of the "social contract": the consent of all members of civil society. What would motivate individuals to forfeit their natural rights and obey a common power? Hobbes's most well-known answer to this question is the fear of death, following his oft-quoted quip that, in a state of nature, absent an overwhelming sovereign, "the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1985, 186). Less well noted is that Hobbes relies not only on fear of death to motivate his social contract, but the "desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living" (Hobbes, 1985, 188).

Thus, not unlike normalcy's advocates today, Hobbes's modern state of "commodious living" offers a kind of return to pre-political comforts, the conveniences enjoyed in absence of political agitation, the routines benefited from before political crisis. We are accustomed to thinking of Hobbes as establishing a new, modern politics. But from this perspective, the politics of the modern state are inextricable from the de-politicization of the body-politic: normal life is garnered at the price of surrendering a mobilized, engaged citizenry. Importantly, the modern state, much like Hobbes's depiction of it on the cover piece of *Leviathan*, simultaneously incorporates and quells the people. After all, in Hobbes's bodily metaphor, the sovereign's body is composed of its individual subjects, such that the homeostasis or the normal functioning of the body-politic necessitates calm among its component parts, the citizens: the ideal modern citizen, for Hobbes, has a preference for equilibrium, a disposition for tranquility. The cunning achievement of the modern state post-Hobbes, in the eras of nationalization and democratization of the 19th and 20th centuries, has been to simultaneously incorporate and quell the people, but to do so not with the aid of Hobbes's perpetual Leviathan, but rather via the enticements of normalcy. It is normalcy that accomplishes the Hobbesian ends, absent the anti-democratic Hobbesean means.

The politics of normalcy in America can be understood by reading the founding text of the American state, *The Federalist Papers*, from under this Hobbesian light. The principal authors, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, were Hobbesian through and through in their goal: devising a system of governance which, as Madison put it in Federalist No. 10, would filter the power of the people through a representative scheme that preserved elite rule. Madison was Hobbesian as well in his understanding of representation. For Hobbes, the Leviathan is

established by the social contract, but is not bound to the will of the body politic in an ongoing fashion. Madison's Hobbesian rejection of direct accountability to the people favored an understanding of the representative as a man of superior wisdom and aristocratic enlightenment, able to operate in the "true interest of their country" (Kramnick 1987, 46). Hamilton likewise captured this Hobbesian notion of the state in Federalist No. 16, suggesting that "the majesty of the national authority" carries "its agency to the persons of the citizens," invoking the embodied Leviathan Hobbes had sketched: an American state embodying its citizens, but simultaneously harboring an independent will (Kramnick 1987, 69).

Also, like Hobbes, Madison and Hamilton forged this political vision in reaction to what they took to be political disorder and chaos—that instigated by the Revolution and perpetuated by the Articles of Confederation. In *Federalist* No. 15, Hamilton writes adamantly of "impending anarchy" should the Articles not be replaced (Kramnick 1987, 20). The Articles presided over a period of popular engagement and democratized governance in American politics: suffrage was extended to most white adult males; religious tests for office were limited; legislatures wielded considerable power in states, which often passed redistributive policies, threatening wealthy property interests; property and wealth requirements for holding office were relaxed. Shays Rebellion presented the concrete prospect of popular revolt on behalf of the abolition of debts and the equal division of property. This particularly exercised Hamilton and Madison, who refer to the Rebellion numerous times in *The Federalist Papers* (Kramnick 1987, 28). Indeed, property rights were the key concern for Madison in Federalist No. 10, and state laws that interfered with private property, contracts, or debts were roundly rebuked as self-evidently unjust in *The Federalist Papers* (Kramnick 1987, 55-56). Thus, Madison submitted that the delegates who

gathered in Philadelphia in May 1787 were “deeply and unanimously impressed with the crisis” (Kramnick 1987, 28). We might say, in Hobbesian terms, they had gathered to preserve peace and commodious living—the normal order of the modern state.

In many ways, then, the founding debate of American politics, that between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists, was one concerning virtues of normalcy in politics. The response of Hamilton and Madison to brewing crisis, to the specter of anarchy they detected in the Articles and Shays Rebellion, was a return to normal order in the form of a strong executive and aristocratic rule. Much like the anti-MAGA normalists of the 21st century, the argument of the Federalists hinged on the assumption that the moment they occupied was uniquely critical and unprecedented, requiring a rearguard politics of restoration, not unlike the language invoked by Biden in his Inaugural Address (Kramnick 1987, 48-49). Anti-Federalists ascertained the guile of the Federalist position as that of proposing a new regime for the purpose of reinstituting a pre-revolutionary political order. They rejected the notion of crisis as a rhetorical ploy aimed at repudiating revolutionary insights on liberty and the undue encroachments of concentrated executive authority. The anti-Federalist, Patrick Henry, for example, saw in the proposed Constitution a counter-revolutionary politics, a revivification of pre-1776 normalcy: “the tyranny of Philadelphia” will replace that of George III, Henry warned at Virginia’s ratifying convention (Kramnick 1987, 17). Other Anti-Federalists made similar arguments, imploring that the new Constitution would transfer power back “from the many to the few” as the Anti-Federalist, Richard Henry Lee, put it (Kramnick 1987, 43).

Weaving together normalcy's 19th century etymology, born of the state's interest population management, statistical averages, and bodily health, with the Hobbessian and Federalist notions of the robust body politic that undergirds the modern state, we can encapsulate the *raison d'être* of a normal politics as the achievement of *tranquility*. "Tranquility" does important work in defining political value in *Leviathan*, *The Federalist Papers*, and the U.S. Constitution. For Hobbes, "there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquility of mind" found in human nature characterized by persistent ambition and desire—the only tranquility one might hope to enjoy is that experienced under the auspices of the Leviathan (Hobbes 1985, 129-130). Hamilton, in Federalist No. 49, writes of "the danger of disturbing the public tranquility by interesting too strongly the public passions," and concludes his defense of the Constitution, in Federalist No. 85, with an appeal to national tranquility. (Hamilton 1987, 314, 487). Indeed, the preamble to the Constitution names "domestic Tranquility" as one of a handful of utmost aims of the American state.

For advocates of normal politics, tranquility is the political health of the body politic in the way homeostasis is the physical healthy the human body: the tranquil state is self-regulating, adjusting to new conditions and challenges, but without surrendering institutional stability; internal change occurs, but the basic structure of political society prevails; the state order itself is not threatened, for it is what sustains national unity. The etymology of tranquility, from the Latin *tranquillus*, means quiet, still, and calm: the tranquil citizen is tailored to fit the Hobbessian and Federalist modern state, which incorporates, and perhaps even represents, citizens of the body politic, all while still quelling those citizens, or "the public passions," as Hamilton put it.

There is, however, significance in the move from *tranquil* to *normal*: although tranquility is the political genealogy of normalcy, only the former explicitly denotes civic quiescence. Normalcy is tranquility amended for an era of democracy, tranquility reformed to reconcile with active citizenship, tranquility rebranded for mid 20th century America's emergent empire, the global defense of freedom. There was time in the early 20th century, as normalcy entered popular discourse, that the two terms were used alongside one another. This slippage is seen in Warren Harding's successful 1920 Presidential campaign, waged on the heels of the First World War, a period characterized domestically by a significant anti-war movement, the first Red Scare, and suppression of free speech and assembly, especially that of civil libertarians, anarchists, and socialists. Harding ran on "the return to normalcy," anticipating the contemporary rhetorical strategy of the anti-MAGA movement (Zimmer 2020; Mallon 2020). "America's present need is not heroics but healing, not nostrums but normalcy," Harding said. "Let us stop to consider," Harding continued, "that tranquility at home is more precious than peace aboard" (Deverell 2020). By midcentury normalcy eclipsed tranquility in discursive salience, substituting the average for the quiescent American.

Average Americans, like the busts of Norma and Normman displayed at the "Portrait of the American People" exhibit, were fit specimens and mobilized citizens, undaunted by political responsibility. After all, a budding empire requires not the idle subjects of the Hobbesian state, but homemakers and foot soldiers; an empire on the make calls not for Madison's filtered scheme of representation, but a groundswell of national solidarity and patriotic zeal. Thus, normalcy's ascendance as a midcentury ideal dispersed the power of the centralized state at the core of the Hobbesian/Madisonian vision, melding that power to the cultural sensibilities of

everyday life in the arenas of family, civility, and morality. As the anti-Vietnam War movement gained steam, it would confront what it dubbed a “war machine” that was humming along not merely within the confines of the Pentagon, but within the average citizen, on Main Street, and at the dinner table.

III: The Critique of Normalcy in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement

The anti-Vietnam War movement was characterized by a paradox as it reached a critical mass in the late 1960s: while public opinion increasingly showed that Americans opposed the Vietnam War, Americans also held the antiwar movement itself in contempt. How could Americans dislike the War but also shun the movement that opposed it? One reason is that the antiwar movement focused its ire at more than just the Vietnam War. The movement rejected the notion that the Vietnam War was an aberration, mistaken policy decision, or unique crisis. Instead, the War was evidence of deeper national maladies and enduring cultural iniquities (Rossinow 1998, 218). The Vietnam War was the product of American normalcy, and a resistance politics could not oppose a foreign policy without also interrogating the ingrained norms of citizenship and national culture that fueled it. Resistance was valuable not merely in terms of halting the Vietnam War effort, but also for its ability to cultivate alternative political consciousness and subversive civic practices that could refashion American democracy. To be sure, some of the most mainstream segments of the movement, such as the Vietnam Moratorium Committee (VMC), attempted to delimit their critique of American society, to contain their activism to foreign policy alone. But even the VMC, in 1969, framed their strike as action against “business as normal” (Hall 2005, 160-161). The anti-Vietnam War movement’s originality was the insight

that the military draft depended for its success not merely on the coercive power of the state, but the cultural ideals of American normalcy too.

One sees this in the leading lights and vanguard activists of the antiwar movement, who often framed the Vietnam War as but a symptom of a broader American system, one in which the average citizen was complicit. In 1965, Allen Ginsburg, the elder guru of the antiwar movement, identified the nation's "war psychology" as the fulcrum of hostilities in Vietnam, suggesting the antiwar movement aimed to disrupt a national ethos, not merely the Pentagon (Ginsberg 2003, 208). Likewise, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, whose work was influential for movement activists, found most laudable in the youth movements of the period, including the antiwar movement, the rejection of a normal life of upward mobility, educational attainment, and career success: "The driving force," Marcuse wrote of the movement, "is the refusal to grow up, to mature, to perform efficiently and 'normally' in and for a society" (Marcuse 1969, 62). Michael Ferber, a draft resistance organizer, and the youngest member of the Boston Five indicted for non-cooperation with Selective Service System in 1967, argued that the continued waging of the War was dependent on the normal operation of daily life. A resistance movement could not only contest mainstream political institutions; rather, it needed to deconstruct and defamiliarize the daily experience of average citizens:

"If the normal day to day pattern of American life were sufficiently disrupted, people in large numbers would have to begin thinking about the nature of their lives and the society around them...People and societies have a hard time existing out of equilibrium...Noncooperation must be seen in its larger context; a seizing of control of

our own lives and a conscious effort to redirect the movement of American society”
(Teodori 1969, 298-99).

Ferber invokes “the normal day to day” in a manner that contests the Hobbesian and Madisonian modern state’s preference for political homeostasis, for the quiescent citizen, incorporated into the body politic, moving seamlessly with the “war machine” (Foley 2003; Wells 1994). The move from “body politic” to “war machine” is significant. In the governing metaphor of the modern state, each citizen is a contributing agent, like the trillions of cells that make up a human body, all carrying out the essential functions that make up the health of the whole. A synergy between the whole and its constituent parts is presupposed in the metaphor. Antiwar activists employed the alternative metaphor of “war machine” to crystalize the mechanical nature of normal citizenship. The modern state does not cultivate the freethinking, autonomous agent of theorized by modern liberalism. Rather, like the operation of a machine, the normal citizen is mechanized, an unconscious automaton.

For antiwar activists like Ferber, what liberal democracy presupposes—the freethinking, autonomous citizen, capable conscious political action and collective self-governance—is precisely what resistance politics is needed to achieve. Natural reason, modern liberal thought stipulated, was the default setting of human nature. Not so, retorts Ferber and the antiwar movement: routinization is the default setting of human nature. Modern liberal thought, and the zeitgeist of the American Revolution, identified the monarchical, authoritarian state as liberal democracy’s singular menace. For Ferber and the antiwar movement, the slumber of normalcy’s

“day to day pattern” is equally capable of undercutting the ideal of liberal democracy, even in the absence of state authoritarianism.

Madison and Hamilton had developed an elaborate scheme of representation designed to include the public while also diluting the “public passions.” Had they been able to consult Ferber, they may have figured that the rote and routine character of mass society made those institutional buffers redundant. The hold of normal life, for Ferber, accomplishes the quelling of the public even amid the more democratized political institutions that the authors of *The Federalist Papers* feared.

Thus, somewhat counterintuitively, the antiwar movement suggested that the seedbed of political change was not an astute political critique of American foreign policy, not even self-evidently political action. Rather, the genesis of resistance was the act of excavating the self, digging up the internalized mechanisms of daily life that were so well-adjusted to American life—a society organized to generate death, at home and overseas. Even as the movement acted in ways that posed a direct political challenge to the War effort, activists explicated their resistance politics in terms that challenged normal life. At Stanford University, for example, students occupied University labs engaged in military related research, penning a newsletter entitled *Declassified*, explaining the occupation. “Through our actions,” the students wrote,

“We challenge the values and assumptions of the men who run Stanford. It is only now, as we break out of the routine and structure of our lives as Stanford students that we can really begin to change our lives. We cannot be judged by the assumptions of a dying

system. We are responsible to our new community, our form of communication and life. We are together, we can share and smile, and we reject the death-style that pervades the society all around” (Lynd and Ferber 1971).

Importantly, the “death-style” of American society manifested not merely in the military generals who operationalized the War, or in the realist hawks who supported the War with “balance of power” theories, or the U.S. Presidents who espoused the War as America’s contribution to the defense of the free world. Rather, the “death-style” manifested most acutely in the carrying on of everyday life, in the ability of normal life to absorb the nightly news of death in Vietnam, in our over-familiarization with war, a normalization of war that entails sanitation. The mass of average Americans, who never had a hand in a single death, who were most distant from the war effort, were the precisely the Americans most powerfully propagating this “death-style.” It is with the average American that the humdrum of the “war machine” is but run-of-the-mill. As student antiwar activists at Oberlin College put it in statement resisting the draft, “We have become so accustomed to the pictures of a missile rising in a graceful arc from the launching pad, controlled from an antiseptic instrument room, and to the thought of the men in a spotless nuclear submarine eating apple pie as they cruise beneath the sea, that we have forgotten what happens at the other end of the missile” (Lynd and Ferber 1971, 14).

The high priest of the anti-Vietnam War movement, himself a Jesuit priest, was Daniel Berrigan. Along with his brother Phillip, Berrigan was a seminal figure in antiwar resistance, the architect of Catonsville 9. On May 17th, 1968, Berrigan and the Catonsville 9 entered a draft board in Catonsville, Maryland, commandeering 400 1-A draft card files of young men earmarked for war

in Vietnam. Placing the draft cards into baskets outside the draft board, the Catonsville 9 proceeded to light the draft cards afire, using a homemade napalm formula they had found in a U.S. Army Special Forces handbook. The Catonsville 9 stood by as the draft files burned, awaiting to be arrested, and charged with interfering with the administration of the Select Service Act (Peters 2012; DeBenedetti 1990, 282; Wilcox 1991, 33-34; Tracy 1996, 146; Varon 2004, 121-122). The statement the Catonsville 9 issued read, in part, “We wish also to place in question, by this act, all suppositions about normal times, about longings for an untroubled life” (Berrigan 1968, Online).

The Catonsville 9 precipitated a period of intensified resistance to the Vietnam War. Berrigan would refuse to surrender to federal authorities following his conviction, becoming from 1968 forward the movement’s most articulate defender of radical action, including property destruction, to end the War (Mayer and Mango 2010, 250-256). But Berrigan’s understanding of war resistance was always tethered to broader political vision. “Is not political activity,” Berrigan asked, “tied to the degree of normalcy, security, routine we are able to dispense with, in the same of some real, visible, vital political changes?” (Berrigan 1972, 72). Berrigan grasped that normalcy, though ostensibly a politically neutral desire and disposition, entailed the depoliticization of a citizenry. The anti-MAGA centrist-liberal coalition rushed to revive a normal politics, hoping normalcy would anesthetize the “public passions” of the MAGA movement, taking a page from Madison and Hamilton. By contrast, Berrigan recognizes that, much like the Vietnam War, the anesthetization of the public is a precondition for MAGA, not its solution. Both the War and MAGA depended on a citizenry invested in idealized, commodified, and

sanitized notions of American national identity, an American normalcy numb to material violence.

In a piece included in *America is Hard to Find*, his seminal text published in 1972, Berrigan anticipates the connective tissue between the Vietnam War and MAGA eras of American normalcy:

Today's untruth is tomorrow gospel, today's military outrage is tomorrow's cliché, today's Presidential lies are tomorrow's diplomatic move. It is not, I judge, that people do not react in human fashion to such crimes, indeed they often over-react. But their reactions are quickly consumed in the hearth of 'normal life'...I am dulled before the fact of death; not by its absence, but by its omnipotence" (Berrigan 1972, 71).

"The hearth of normal life" is Berrigan's recognition that a normal politics offers a kind of solace. This solace subsumes our senses, evaporates our political consciousness. We are no longer startled by napalm burned bodies in Vietnam or an insurrection at the Capitol. The anti-MAGA attempt to "return to normal" doesn't work, Berrigan would have submitted, in part because by the time one issues the call for normalcy, the inviting warmth of a new normal has already taken us in. After all, even Berrigan, this vanguard figure of war resistance, struggled mightily to slough off the patriotic faith in American institutions that is so characteristic of normal politics, especially that proffered by anti-MAGA liberals. It took Berrigan until 1968 to enact the sabotage characteristic of Catonsville, and he never stopped regretting that it took so damn long. "If I have any regrets about the past years," Berrigan wrote,

They center around the tardiness with which I went to Catonsville. If I had gone sooner...what horrors might have been averted!...But nothing of this happened. I was long bemused by a 'normalcy' that blinded my eyes. I had been equipped to deal only with normal times...Normalcy was still possible; we would invoke normal good sense, expect it of our military and political leaders; bless those who were unlucky enough to be shipped off, regret the inevitable deaths" (Berrigan 1972, 132).

One of the paradoxes of liberal democracy is that it depends upon an independent minded and publicly engaged citizenry, but it lives in the shell of the modern nation-state that vitiates against those civic capacities. Liberal democracy may demand critical consciousness, but the institutions of the modern nation-state that manifest liberal democracy are always enmeshed with normalcy. The antiwar movement ascertained this tension, fashioning a resistance politics to untether liberal democracy from normalcy's benumbing strictures. "What else have we been up to these several years?" Berrigan asked,

We have been trying mightily to avoid the distraction from reality which is almost a stigma of the modern mind. We have been practicing, with very mixed success, so simple a thing as concentration" (Berrigan 1972, 77).

Resistance is often cast as radical action of the kind the Catonsville 9 took to disrupt the American war machine. But Berrigan knew that the kernel of resistance was the discomfort of ongoing self-examination. Berrigan's work demonstrated another paradox of liberal democracy:

its realization is reliant on that—resistance movements—which it does not explicitly legitimize, and often, through its cohabitation with the modern state, disavows or subverts. “How do we make the ‘peace movement’ into a normal, functional way of conducting our human business?” Berrigan asked (Berrigan 1972, 71).

This is the question, equally relevant today as amid the Vietnam War, that the antiwar movement leaves us with. To be sure, the anti-MAGA coalition, which attempted to turn us back to normal, began with the Women’s March, mobilizing millions of participants to march on a single day in January 2017. Berrigan wouldn’t have been impressed. He’d seen his fair share of well attended marches, both before Catonsville in 1968 and after, all the while the war machine motored forward. “All such happenings,” Berrigan inveighed, “have not issued in much; people have undertaken them as moral ‘extras,’ always with an eye to the great return: back to job, family, business as usual” (Berrigan 1972, 83).

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