

# LACANIAN REVIEW

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# ONLINE

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COVID-19 2020

#25 to #30

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## Corona – Eros is not the answer

By *Evi Verbeke* (Belgium)

In different blogs, psychoanalysts attested that corona confronts us with a ravaging real that causes worldwide anxiety. This anxiety demands a symptomatic answer, to mask the lack in the symbolic and the painful *nonsense* of the real [1]. I think one of those symptoms is the ‘solidarity discourse’ that keeps popping up everywhere. Before corona, social media was full of little fights between left and right, now social media is like one big love fest. Every # is about love, appreciation and respect. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that. It is comforting to see that people create symptoms that are helpful to others, like volunteers making mouth masks or neighbours doing groceries for each other. These acts show that human beings are as creative as ever when confronted with the real and that humanity always shows through.



However, this discourse remains a symptom and as it pacifies our anxiety, it also testifies of the failing to cover up the real of our body and our social interactions. How do we encounter this in the solidarity discourse? Not in the day to day interactions between people helping each other out, but in the testimonials that promise a brighter and better future. Now that we are all helping each other, we will see that this is a better way to live and we can finally abandon that dirty old capitalism and individualism – or so it goes. We will appreciate social relationships more, our health care will improve, we will become more environmentally aware now that we notice how clean our air and water can be, and we will all become vegetarians. One Belgian professor in economics even stated that the end of corona will open the beginning of a Golden Era [2]. So, all that was needed to stop capitalism was a simple virus? If only we had known before!

Precisely this is the problem of the solidarity discourse. Not so much that people help and support each other (which is necessary in times like these), but that a new world is promised. A world where the nasty real will finally be gone forever, a world where Eros will reign over Thanatos. At last! Understanding this from a psychoanalytical point of view, this is a problematic illusion. Plain and simple Eros has never been a smart solution, because Eros always entails Thanatos. These drives are not separated, and every new ethic based on Eros will have its own traces of Thanatos. We already see this problem arising. In the love and hope for a brighter future we show solidarity with nurses, policemen and all kinds of working people “going into war”. Yet – just like every discourse – the solidarity discourse leaves a lack, a group of misfits. The homeless and refugees all over Europe are precisely that lack: they do not get any applause, they cannot be heroic by ‘staying at home’ and they do not get any flashy # on social media. That is why it is so easy for right-winged ideologies to abuse the solidarity discourse. Some politicians fully endorse the solidarity discourse, applauding for every nurse worldwide. At the same time they state that corona shows us borders should be closed and refugees are dangerous because they spread the virus more easily and import additional diseases that give our brave nurses even more work.

Every crisis can be an opportunity to seek alternatives and change the way we live. Corona could indeed be a terrific opportunity to do this, because it attacks us globally without differentiating in class, race, gender or education. We are all in the same boat, and this creates a momentum to change our way of living. And corona laid bare some of the power structures that inhabit us, like our over-reliance on economy and how much we do in fact pollute the air. In this sense, corona could cause little reservoirs of new forms of *resistance* in the power networks: it questions what was obvious before and can bring about change. Yet, if we think corona could render possible a *revolution*, we are very much mistaken. Corona will change our discourses and will cause shifts in how we try to cope with the real. But it will not do that by using Eros to lock up our old monsters and invent new saints. As long as we have a body, as long as we speak, the real will persist. We should not use corona to herald a Golden Era. We should use this crisis to understand how fragile the human being is and to look for ways to cope with this fragility. Not as a revolution, but as a subtle resistance against the power dynamics that have become obvious through corona.

[1] Lacan, J. (2014). The seminar of Jacques Lacan book X. Anxiety. *Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller*. Cambridge/Malde: Polity Press.

[2] [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200319\\_04896040](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200319_04896040)

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## Banality of the Real

By *Bogdan Wolf* (UK)

It is not a secret that Count Johnson has been using services of various cunning advisers who stand behind his policies. It has now come to view that the source of proposed “herd immunity” policy, to which I referred in my LRO text of 17 March, originates from a controversial figure of Dominic Cumming. He is not only Premier’s *alter ego* and chief adviser, but also chief architect of Vote Leave Campaign, known as Brexit, who promised to reorganise British civil service in accordance with new selection criteria for servants as “weirdoes and misfits” he would himself police. Last month, for

example, he recruited Mr Andrew Sabiski who, as it quickly emerged, had been transmitting views that black people have lower IQ than white people, and recommended introduction of contraceptive control for the purpose of preventing to create a permanent underclass. These racist views led to Mr Sabiski being sacked before he got used to the new post.

Does this explain or at least shed new light on specific character of the function of law in the UK as all regulating and all-organising where liberalism enjoys being both its beneficiary and a stranger? It is not by accident that in the face of the viral plague that we fear as creeping in from every social corner to the uncertainty each moment brings, the policy adopted by the Count is that of delay in the name of liberalism taking on a form of advice and recommendation: “please, please stay at home, don’t think that fresh air is



some immunity”, as he said again on Sunday, 23 March. Everyone is now speaking about Britain’s exceptional position which is not without an exceptional standpoint taken by an adviser who carries, apparently, the brightest torch of democracy. It has now come to light, by no gossip-spreading rag but by Sunday Times (23 March), that the “herd immunity” policy that passed briefly through blue-print stage, was in fact designed by Mr Cumming. He was allegedly overheard as advocating it, adding “and if some pensioners die, it’s too bad”. The government vehemently denied it, which has not deflected us from being confronted with a desire at work that is not any desire but a masochist one. There is the real we fear as a community confronted with invisible invasion of headless army, and cling to daily statistics, and there is a real mobilised by missing knowledge and absent signifier to assuage anxiety, or as E. Laurent beautifully put it, to disanguish it. This is how Lacan read Freud’s distinction between fear and anxiety. Lacan refined this difference by adding that there is no anxiety without the real.

The current policy of delay, and social sensitivity teased by it, is one of the effects of how the real of anxiety is, or not, recognised. The striking reluctance to abandon democratic liberties as an alternative to imposition of prohibitive law amounts to keeping the law at a distance, so that to support *jouissance* of anything goes, i.e. or of a well-intentioned advice, that in turn keeps the phallic value of economy rolling. There is another way to enjoy one’s satisfactions than by transgressing the law that for this reason is not imposed. When Lacan spoke about desire in its transgressive function in relation to the law (Sem. XI), he also spoke about desire as mobilised by a lack. This was of importance to him when he took up man’s position in sexuation. In the end Lacan concluded that lack is an entirely man’s affair.

The only policy that in effect British PM has come up with and pursued to-date is that of “social distancing”. It’s indeed a weird formulation, and the exact opposite to the animation in the medial, social connections and transmission of which LRO community is the very testimony! Human, speaking beings, and women in particular and in the singular, are not cut for “social distancing”. Why not simply have a ban on public gatherings, a law with which we are *all* familiar? The other term, “self-isolation” (“self” to suggest that you and I want it), seems even stranger but is not out of place as it reminds us of banishment and its corollary of deportation and removal policies that keep the sense of racism, as exclusion of *heteros*, alive. Let’s see where this formulation takes us. On the one hand, “social distancing” translates into distance from law’s prohibitive function that dominates British political and historical scene. On the other hand, the politics of libertarian recommendation as measure of protection against spread of virus speaks of distance, and isolation as man would, from law’s constitutive function of desire in relation to anxiety. What Mr Johnson adheres to in his handling of the current situation is the advice transmitted to him *père-versely* by advisors and followed as such. Banalisation of the real

in this sense in politics today consists in a push to degrade the real, as extimate to desire, from the singular economy of *jouissance* of a speaking, anguished body. We are confronted with banality of the real for which the only responsibility appears to be that of denial and delay by a man and his polymorphic solutions.

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## The Con Man Behind The Curtain

By *Gustavo Dessal* (Spain)

“It has taken a good deal longer than it should have, but Americans have now seen the con man behind the curtain,”<sup>[1]</sup> writes Peter Wehner in his column for *The Atlantic* referring to Donald Trump. The unexpected event, once again, can change the course of history. This is why political predictions so often suffer the outbreak of the real. The pandemic has busted Trump in the face, and all his tantrums and his Twitters are increasingly perceived for what they are: the manifestation of an alienated mind, of a seriously disturbed personality, not only from the psychopathological point of view, but fundamentally from the moral one. Beyond all diagnostic consideration, amply demonstrated, it is no longer possible to hide the obscene appearance of the character, his total lack of scruples and his absolute condition of knave. It is not known how many deaths will occur due to the disastrous management of the pandemic, but perhaps it is the death sentence of this presidency, although this is not certain either. Monsters never completely die. It would be curious that the coronavirus had the unexpected property of being the kind of real that awakens the conscience of a part of the American people, the one that still continues to dream the idiotic dream that will turn into a nightmare.

But beyond Trump and the paradoxical consequence that this misfortune could bring to the United States and to the entire world, we find once again the extraordinary phenomenon, repeated throughout history, that under certain conditions certain degenerate characters not only become the leaders of the masses, but also the drivers of an entire nation towards the slope of catastrophe. Hitler remains, undoubtedly, the great champion of this phenomenon, just as the Germans and many of their neighbors can up to now maintain the first place of crime and simultaneous collective suicide in *The Guinness Book of Records*. Hannah Arendt dedicated a large part of her life to investigate this human mystery, and her findings maintain an indisputable scope and validity.



In view of the rise of fascism, Freud and Lacan were forced to fine-tune the analytical instruments to decipher that lethal phenomenon that germinates in the dark and fetid magma known by the names of homeland, nation or people, the latter perhaps being the most dangerous of all, especially due to the unusual speed with which the seduction of its use can spread.

Now we have become infected with universal love, because in the face of the feeling that the end of the world is approaching, we want -from our forced confinement- to embrace and hold hands. Twinned

in our misery, we trust we can save one another. This is moving, and at the same time disturbing. What will be the fate of all that love that is accumulating and overflowing in an irrepressible river of solidarity? We don't know, but in the meantime it is definitely very welcome. We do know that the sale of guns in the USA has gone through the roof. Perhaps it is because due to the prospect that hangs over the country, the millennialism inherent to this society prepares for a scenario similar to the one depicted by Cormac McCarthy in his novel "The Road": each one defending the possible assault on their fridges and their supply of toilet paper. Like most people, I am moved by the daily initiatives aimed at alleviating the anguish and pain that we suffer. At the same time, I keep a safe distance (at least a meter and a half) to avoid the possibility that we will re-infect ourselves with our own human condition, the one that sooner or later makes us return to reality. Many predict that this will change us on the outside and inside, that we will have to reinvent ourselves and that we will be better. That this virus that fell from the sky, like the color of Lovecraft's story, will be remembered as that which led us back onto the pathway where we had gone astray long ago. When did we get lost? Where did we go wrong? With capitalism? With the fall of the Roman Empire? When we crucified Jesus Christ? At what point did the chariot of history get out of its way and led us to the error that we have perpetuated since? Possibly these questions don't have any meaning whatsoever. History already started crooked, because it is made of what we are all made of. We are creatures chained by the force of repetition. Nothing is repeated in the same way, but the resemblance is amazing. As amazing as the love added every day to the ingredients of our epidemic madness.

*Translated by Florencia Shanahan & Roger Litten*

[1] <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/peter-wehner-trump-presidency-over/607969/>

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## **The Host of the Virus**

By *Marina Frangiadaki* (Greece)

Confined, reading articles about the virus, I notice a signifier relating to the origin of the virus appearing repeatedly. Its strangeness surprises me. The host of the virus; in Greek: *xenistis*.

“A virus is an infectious agent requiring a host whose metabolism and constituents it uses to replicate.”

“In biology, a host is an organism that hosts a parasite, a mutual partner or a commensal partner, necessary for its life cycle.”

I had never imagined that a virus needed a host to circulate! In addition, is the virus a partner of the





host? If we think that the host of our dear, horrible virus is probably, according to scientists, a cute little animal with the exotic name of *pangolin*, it all becomes more intriguing.

Host, what a funny signifier!

Let's continue the etymological research into the word, trying to catch this real in the way that psychoanalysis of the Lacanian orientation teaches us, which is to say, trying to define it by language, by the signifier cut off from its signified, by the ambiguity which makes meaning empty, by the deployment of the signifying chain, which brings out new significations ...

The host is "the one, the one who receives and treats someone without payment, who gives him hospitality, by humanity, by friendship, by benevolence."<sup>[1]</sup> But also "the one that we receive and that we treat well." The host is then the one who welcomes but also the one who is welcomed.

The word comes from the Latin *hospitem*, accusative of *hospes* (guest, foreigner, visitor) which originally means the one who welcomes the foreigner. Later, it means also the one who receives hospitality.

By its Latin root, host is related to the hotel, the hospitality but also the hospital and the hostage.<sup>[2]</sup> This is what makes this research a little funny at a moment when, because of our being the host of the virus, we feel ourselves to be hostages, confined in our home so as not to end up in hospital ...

The Greek word is even more revealing. The host of the virus in Greek is called *xenistis*. It has its root in the ancient word *xenios* which meant one who welcomes the stranger; hence the widespread adjective relating to Zeus, the *Xenios Zeus*, who protected the reception of foreigners, which was considered sacred. From the same root, *xenos* has taken on the meaning of foreigner and strange in Greek.

The richness of the language brings the stranger closer to his host.

Back to the virus, an object that is threatening and strange. We live in a new situation where it is difficult to recognise this *kakon*, as it is invisible, and it is difficult to give it a representation. Less than two months ago, in racist speech, the *kakon* could be attributed to the one with Asian features. A month ago, it was to the one with an Italian accent. A fortnight ago it was one who was coughing in the seat next to us at the cinema. And today, the *kakon* can be found in our own dirty hand that moves with a spontaneous gesture towards our own face.

If it were not so dramatic, it could be a comic way to illustrate the Lacanian thesis, namely that what comes to embody the bad object, the waste, the *kakon* in a relationship of extimacy, is originally very intimate, a part of ourselves.

This does not prevent racist discourse from persisting and using an absurd amalgamation between the stranger, the refugee and the virus to make hate exist.

The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, closes the border and announces "a war on two fronts ... that of migration and that of the coronavirus, which are linked because they both spread with displacement," he said. He affirmed this by accusing Iranian students of having introduced the coronavirus into Hungary, not hesitating to call the virus a "foreigners' disease."<sup>[3]</sup> Since the appearance of Covid-19 on Hungarian territory, the government has suspended the registration of asylum applications, arguing that migrants are likely to be carrying the virus.

A month ago, when the situation was dramatic at the Greek-Turkish border, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister of a right-wing government, who often adopts an extreme right-wing language, declared that the problem of “immigration rises to a different level, since in the migratory flow there are many people from Iran – where there are many cases of coronavirus – and many others from Afghanistan.” We must not forget that when taking office last summer, one of the first measures of the new government was to remove all foreigners and refugees without documents, as well as their children from the list of those who had access to care! The refugees were left without access to basic healthcare, their children were no longer vaccinated and as a result no longer educated; a vaccination card is compulsory in order for children to be able to attend school. They have become, by political choice, harmful to themselves and to others.

This barbaric measure could not be imposed with great success thanks to the activity of NGOs and the civil disobedience of certain caregivers and school principals.

Today, in the Moria refugee camp, in and around Lesbos, known as the Moria “jungle,” the number of refugees has exceeded 20,000 in extremely poor living and hygienic conditions. We can imagine what will happen when the first case of coronavirus appears.

How ironic! At a time in history when Europe shamelessly<sup>[4]</sup> closes its borders and behaves barbarically and locks up foreigners who seek refuge from horror, a virus, which knows no borders, is seeking to find refuge in our own body, which we try to protect by locking it up.

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[1] <https://www.littre.org/definition/hôte>

[2] O. Bloch et W. von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, ed PUF, Paris, 1975, p. 324, p. 451.

[3] [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/03/21/en-hongrie-les-etrangers-coupables-tout-trouves-de-l-epidemie\\_1782526](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/03/21/en-hongrie-les-etrangers-coupables-tout-trouves-de-l-epidemie_1782526)

[4] Reference to the breathtaking book by Jean Ziegler which has just been published, *Lesbos, la honte de l'Europe*, [Lesbos, the Shame of Europe], Seuil, Paris, 2020.

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## We Shall Build Up Again...

By Jorge Assef (Argentina)

In the summer of 1913, during his vacation in northern Italy, Sigmund Freud went walking with two friends, one of whom, the poet, complained that he could not enjoy the scenery because the idea that all this beauty would vanish did not cease to assail him. Freud tried to convince him otherwise:

*I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth (...) It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy of it (...) transience value is scarcity value in time. As the conversation went on, Freud realized that he was not going to persuade his friends: ...My failure led me to infer that some powerful emotional factor was at work which was disturbing their judgement (...) it must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning<sup>[1]</sup>.*

This was still two years before Freud published "Thoughts for the times on War and Death" (1915) and four years before "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), but it is clear that the short essay "On Transience" that Freud presented at the Goethe Society in Berlin, where he takes up the anecdote we have just mentioned, already has the germ of those central texts of his works that resonate with Lacan's words in his lecture in Louvain: "Death belongs to the domain of faith: you are right to believe you'll die, it sustains you" [\[2\]](#).



It is appropriate to recall that the texts of Freud that we have mentioned are marked by the devastating event of the First World War (1914 - 1918). It is in this context that Freud develops his ideas about the denial of death as a fundamental defensive mechanism in the face of horror, the absence of meaning and the impossible to name, in other words: the real.

In a context of urgency that requires extreme health measures, psychoanalysis can be a device to subjectify the effects these measures have on each single individual. It is a way to contribute to public health, and to put the analyst's desire also at the service of the circumstances in a time of crisis and rupture of the symbolic order.

When Lacan encouraged analysts to unite their horizon of practice with the subjectivity of their time, he did not mean that we, as intellectuals, should study the course of history from our offices, but rather that we are part of history. The pandemic that is currently hitting the world is history demanding us to assume our primary role in the social fabric: to be those who allow "this thing" to be articulated.

Therefore, locating what "pandemic" means for each single individual, what "quarantine" means for this or that particular subject, or "social isolation" for that one, and "respirator" for this other person, is a possibility that psychoanalysis can offer to the world. Because each one of those words repeated non-stop on TV today strikes every subject's body in a different way. These are words that should be used in the singular so that denial and fear do not end up undermining life.

Of course, once the Pandemic is over the world will be different, we will have time to interpret these changes then, and it will be fascinating. In the meantime, we can act on the emergency, we can weave ourselves within the social fabric in many ways, contributing to what needs to be done in the emergency, because the risk is precisely that the exaggeration of "prudence" of some will work as an accomplice to the denial and fear of others.

As for the anecdote Freud tells in that beautiful text of 1915, after explaining that the most intriguing aspect of the mourning mechanisms is the rigidity with which the libido clings to the lost object without noticing that the New is already awaiting it, Freud writes:

*My conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the war. A year later the war broke up and robbed the world of its beauty (...) it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness (...) It robbed us of very much we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless.*



So Freud warns that those who relinquish the enjoyment of something because what is valued does not prove to be long-lasting are simply in a state of mourning for the loss, but he makes it clear that mourning will at some point expire, and adds: *When once the mourning is over, it will found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before*<sup>[3]</sup>.

[1] Freud, S: "On Transience", *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIV, p. 305. The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis. London, 1957, p. 305.

[2] Lacan, J.: *Conference in Louvain* (1972). *Quarto 3. Lettre mensuelle de l'Ecole de la Cause Freudienne*. Paris, 1981.

[3] Freud, S.: "On Transience", *Complete Works*, Vol. XVI, p. 307. The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis. London, 1957, p. 307.

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## In Times of Crisis, the Other Demands Your Body to Cover Up His Lack

By Nikos Skarvelis (UK)

Worldwide, human subjects experience an imposed control and restriction of their personal freedom in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eventually all governments resort to the same measures: self-isolation, social distancing, total lockdown, restrictions of free movement, ban of all 'non-essential' travel and socializing. The argument is that this is the way to 'flatten the curve'; slow down the spread of the virus and make sure the minimum amount of people are infected at once, so national healthcare systems can cope. This started off as advice by the Other –governments, scientific community- and quickly developed into statutory imposed measures effected by the police and the army.



No one really doubts the necessity of this -given the proven rapid spread of the virus- and most subjects stick to the imposed rules for the 'common good', and seem to be tuned to the force of this real that threatens and disturbs them. I had a debate with some friends living in Greece when all the strictest measures had been imposed there, on whether it is appropriate to criticize governments for having abandoned national healthcare systems, resulting in the present global lack of medical staff and resources. My initial response was that this discussion should be reserved for a post-crisis time, as now we all had to be united and focused not on criticism, but on providing realistic solutions.

However, when the strictest measures were imposed in London, I found myself having a completely different response; I was suddenly taken aback and was mad! I discussed this change of attitude in my

session over the phone. I eventually concluded that what really shifted my position was that the lockdown now affected me personally; it was not something I observed happening in another country, but something that was happening to me. After all, all politics is personal deep down I said, and I was trying not to feel guilty about this. I employed a Greek saying: "Outside of the dance, you can tell many songs." This means that from an external point of view, you can offer multiple opinions on a subject –which do not necessarily correspond to the real of the struggle at stake- because you are not personally affected.

My analyst agreed that all political opinion is subjective, and added that this situation affected me primarily on my body. I do not know if my new subjective position is an effect of what I said and of my analyst's interpretations, but here it is nevertheless: There is a societal battle with COVID-19. However, it is not restricted to eliminating the virus, but extends to fighting the conditions that make such extreme measures necessary.

The degree of state control and restrictions on the subjects' free movement, is analogous to the degree of lack and deficiency in the Other: The more national healthcare systems are lacking in medical staff, resources, and facilities -and so are inadequate to tackle the virus if it spreads- the more every subject needs to be deprived of their freedom, so as to 'flatten the curve'.

In other words, what is really happening in this pandemic is that the Other demands from every subject to limit and 'sacrifice' their body –you are literally forbidden to go to certain places, or meet people- in order to cover up this lack in the Other and protect its collapse. In order to maintain the image that the Other is complete, able to cope, and will emerge triumphant from this 'tragedy', each subject has to pay the price, with their body, by surrendering their social life and freedom. There is a new signifier for this: 'individual responsibility'. The Other is willing to pay almost nothing. Even now, governments are reluctant to seize control of private healthcare equipment and facilities, to recruit more doctors and nurses, to buy and distribute widely tests, to freeze outstanding bills and provide guarantees of sick pay. Even now, governments are not willing to 'put their money' on public healthcare.

As I said, I believe most people do acknowledge the necessity of the measures, and of 'individual responsibility'. However, if people keep refusing to see the lack in the Other, they will have to pay with their body again, for another 'crisis' this time.

Stop clapping on the balconies and tapping governments on their shoulder. Demand that the Other takes responsibility now. Change is possible only in the gap opened by the real, exposing the incompleteness in the Other. Is this a hysterical demand to make? Perhaps it is, but it is a way forward.

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