



Actionism and Restraint in 2020: A Conversation between Brent Steele and Christopher Peys

by Brent Steele and Christopher Peys



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Abstract

Taking into account the turbulent sociopolitical events of the first half of 2020, this discussion piece evaluates the theory of restraint presented in Brent Steele's 2019 book, *Restraint in International Politics*. A conversation between Steele and Christopher Peys about the 'politics of restraint', this article examines the socio-psychological 'complexes' of actionism and restraint, and addresses a series of queries about both the limitations and possibilities of restraint, before examining Steele's theory in the emerging context of our world's recent race-related events, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the international community's inability to confront the threat of widespread, human-induced environmental degradation.

Keywords: Restraint; Actionism; Black Lives Matter; COVID-19; Climate Change.

Introduction

I hope in the years to come everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge. And those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any. That the attributes of self-discipline, of quiet good-humoured resolve and of fellow-feeling still characterise this country. The pride in who we are is not a part of our past, it defines our present and our future.

Queen Elizabeth II, *COVID-19 speech to the UK & Commonwealth*

The Conscious Neck Restraint may be used against a subject who is actively resisting.

Minneapolis Police Department (MPD), *Policy on the use of force*¹

...These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!

President Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), *Tweet*

Emergency powers that governments have adopted should not be used as a weapon to quash dissent, control the population, and even perpetuate their time in power. Exceptional measures should be used to cope with the pandemic – nothing more, nothing less.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, *Video message on COVID-19*

In *Restraint in international politics*, Brent J. Steele presents his readers with a comprehensive international political theory of 'restraint' and a cogent argument for why – throughout history – 'the



struggles we find in global politics are really struggles over restraint' (2019, p. 2). Not only is this a bold thesis – in the sense that it asks scholars of global politics to reconsider international affairs through a particular socio-psychological frame of analysis (the notion and practice of restraint) – but it is also a line of thought that has powerful, and direct, implications for how individuals, groups and nations might choose to (re)act (non-violently) to (violent) acts that threaten their security, sense of Self (their ontological security) and/or the status quo. That is, to think “restraint” with Steele is to reconsider what “restraint” is and what a ‘strategic narrative of restraint’ could look like as an approach to (international) security (ibid., pp. 254–266). It is also to begin understanding how, for instance, the identity of a nation might be built around a sense of ‘self-discipline’ and a ‘quiet good-humoured resolve’ (and what the consequences of this sense of self-identity are for how said nation interacts with other peoples, or has done throughout history); why the President of the United States can so easily employ a racially-charged ‘loot’ and ‘shoot’ narrative as a means of justifying domestic military action; and/or how – to borrow the words of the UN High Commissioner – ‘emergency measures’ can become a ‘weapon to quash dissent, control the population, and even perpetuate [a government’s] time in power’. At a time when people throughout the world have struggled to be restrained and to practise restraint as COVID-19 has spread around the globe, and when a worldwide series of race-related protests have taken place in response to how George Floyd was, quite literally, *restrained* to death, Steele’s book offers us an opportunity to comprehend more fully the nature, politics and morality of restraint.

Drawing on support from disciplines across the Social Sciences and Humanities (namely Political Science, Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology), *Restraint in international politics (RinIP)* is a text that: 1) provides an inventory of how restraint has been treated in the field of International Relations (IR); 2) outlines Steele’s unique conceptualisation of restraint; 3) incorporates more fully Carl Jung’s work into the discipline of IR; 4) demonstrates how the history of global politics is a history of a politics of restraint; and 5) presents an argument for both how and why people can/should practise more diligently a (global) politics of restraint in late modernity (pp. 5–7). In this multifaceted, multipurposed book, Steele investigates restraint in relation to its conceptual counterpart, what he refers to as ‘actionism’, developing a distinctive account of these “doppelgänger” concepts in an effort to fashion a new analytical frame through which to study (global) politics and the doing of international relations (pp. 1–2). In his treatment of actionism and restraint, Steele first provides a nuanced historical, socio-psychological “chronicle” of restraint (p. 266), one which he develops through a reading of Norbert Elias’ work. Steele then explores ‘actionism’ and ‘restraint’ as two interrelated ‘complexes’, using Jung’s work on the human psyche and his theory of the libido – as well as his related notion of ‘synchronicity’ – to supplement his sociology of these two complexes and to theorise how libidinal, ‘psychic energy’ informs the ways in which individuals, groups and nations interact. Thus, understood in terms of a contestation between competing libidinal urges (actionism and restraint), it becomes possible for scholars of global politics to consider in a new light how political agents engage with one another within the international political realm; to account for the manifold ways in which global politics are constituted and conditioned by a synchrony of relations between body and mind, materials and ideas; and – perhaps most significantly in terms of employing restraint strategically – to understand the moral quality of both acting restrained and the act of restraining others.

Originating from a June 2020 conversation between Christopher Peys and Steele, one which was expounded upon in further correspondence, this dialogue piece begins by probing the boundaries of the theory of political restraint outlined in *RinIP*, before re-evaluating restraint and actionism in light of the (global) political crises that occurred during the first half of 2020. Accordingly, this piece addresses a series of queries about both the political possibilities and limitations of these two inter-related ‘complexes’: it examines Steele’s account of restraint in the emerging context of recent race-related events, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the international community’s inability to



confront the threat of widespread, human-induced environmental degradation. Bringing together Steele's reflections on restraint and Peys' reading of *RinIP*, a study which was informed by the theory of public, political 'care' he developed in *Reconsidering cosmopolitanism and forgiveness: Arendt, Derrida, and "care for the world"* (2020), this article presents what might be described as an instance of, to borrow the words of Hannah Arendt, 'thinking through experience' (Arendt, 1979, p. 308). With this exchange, Steele and Peys hope to offer readers of *Contemporary Voices in International Relations (CVIR)* an instructive example of how scholars can ground their intellectual interests within a politically urgent context, in this case, the year 2020.

The politics of restraint

Dr Christopher Peys: Before delving more fully into an exploration of the ways in which we might understand our world's recent challenges in terms of your analytical framework, I hoped you might comment a little further on the relationship between actionism and restraint. I am particularly interested in your Jungian conceptualisation of actionism and restraint, according to which these two modes of being can be said to correspond with the unleashing or restraining of libidinal psychic energy. I am curious about the way(s) in which the complex of restraint is conditioned by actionism; that is, I would be eager to hear more about how restraint is a response – a re-action (Steele, 2019, p. 5) – to actionism. If, as you suggest, 'restraint is the *going against* or resisting something we would otherwise expect to prevail', and if there 'is still *movement within a restrained body*' (ibid., p. 12), are we not, then, fundamentally concerned with action itself, using the notion/practice of restraint as a type of analytical foil against which to examine moments of (international) political action? Is the notion of *acting* in a restrained manner – or the act of restraining another party – not foremost a "doing", a political endeavour, an *action*?

Professor Brent J. Steele: Thanks, Chris, and thank you for your detailed introduction and for hosting me in this important conversation. Thanks especially for your detailed and close reading of my book.

The short answer to your last provocative question here is "yes". And by 'concerned with action itself', that is precisely the ontological, but also political and ethical, starting point I am trying to get at in my book. Why do people feel some need to act? Or do they? Or do they always? The answer for why we need to act that Jung gives, which echoes some of the philosophy of the Stoics in their concept of *pneuma* or 'spiritual fire', is that we have a libidinal psychic energy that is always there. What we do with it is, of course, varied and more complex than that because the "we" is not exclusive, nor is it only about an agent or several agents acting (or not). Structures (political, social, emotional, international) also express this struggle. So, my concern with action was a *concern*. Why do we always have to act? Why do we valorise it? And the answer you have here, that restraint is also an action, is where I end up. We need not look at restraint as something denying action – doing so sets restraint up to be characterised as something not only apolitical, but antipolitical. And that would be bad. Restraint is the expression of politics. In fact, politics requires restraint. So, restraint is also an action, one shaped by psychic energy, a *different* but equally forceful way of handling action than unleashing psychic energy.

Peys: As a scholar whose work is concerned with reconciliatory forms of political practice, most recently the notion/practice of political forgiveness and what I have described as a discursive, 'caring' cosmopolitanism (Peys, 2020), your conceptualisation of restraint – as an action – strikes me as being a thoroughly important factor in how we can think about alternative, non-violent and world-affirming modes of doing (global) politics. For instance, when thinking about political forgiveness in terms of your conceptualisation of restraint, I find myself very much agreeing with



you that there is a need to recognise the active dynamics of channelling, refocusing and potentially suppressing feelings of anger, sorrow, resentment etc. (all of which, if we are not careful, potentially contribute to the [re]ignition of the 'spiritual fire' of actionism). I am wondering, however, if we can explore in a little more detail how you conceptualise "the political" in terms of your account of the *politics* of restraint.

Though it is, perhaps, challenging to offer a precise account within the boundaries of this discussion, I am particularly keen to understand more clearly a "Steelean" theory of politics because of its implications not only for how we might conceptualise the "struggle" over restraint that forms the heart of your book's thesis, but also for how we might think about the possibilities of cooperative action in the international political realm. Given your framing of actionism in terms of Francois Debrix's 'agonal' interpretation of Arendt's account of political 'action' (Steele, 2019, pp. 75–76; Debrix, 2007, p. 114),² are we right to think of your understanding of "the political" along more agonistic lines (though not necessarily as radically as Chantal Mouffe might in her work)? Of course, this is but one possible means of conceptualising politics – as well as only one approach to reading Arendt's work – and I wondered if you might be willing to outline in greater detail your understanding of what "politics" is for you, not least because you have underscored here how 'restraint is also an action [...] a different but equally forceful way of handling action than unleashing psychic energy'.

Steele: Great question, but I will answer it as simply as I can. Politics involves not only participation but also enabling others to participate. The former for some is quite easy, but for others it is not. So, you need the latter to enliven politics. At my core, I am a Niebuhrian. I think people are driven to really bad excess and then they try and find moral reasons to justify that excess. Restraint is a tonic for that. But it is also agonising (and, yes, probably agonistic).

Peys: Building on my prior question, as well as your conceptualisation of politics, I would be keen to understand what the implications of your particular framing of restraint/actionism are for thinking about history, and – more specifically – reading and writing international political history as an ever-alternating play of (un)restrained (re)actions. This is a line of thought you begin to develop in the fourth chapter of your book, where – citing Elias' work in *The civilizing process* (2000 [1939]) – you outline a 'generational' socio-historical approach which suggests that history can be told as a story of the contestations between older, 'Established' generations and younger, 'Outsider' generations. This is a thoroughly thought-provoking means of thinking about history, as well as the 'somewhat common assumption that democracy, both as a form of government and as a "culture", engenders restraint' (Steele, 2019, p. 124). However, and to put the first of two interrelated queries on the proverbial table, I wonder if this leaves us in danger of simplifying history to the extent that our narrative of the past is reduced to a movement between two libidinal energies (specifically between but two complexes, actionism and restraint). Does conceptualising international political history in such dichotomous socio-psychological terms allow us to present a truly comprehensive, nuanced 'history of the present' (*ibid.*, p. 6)? In other words, are we, as scholars, exercising too much restraint in our own telling of history?

Steele: Let me answer this question before moving on to the next one, even though I know they are related. Does generational analysis simplify the narrative? Of course. A narrative, by its essence, is a simplification, a story, one with a plot and other elements (which I also note in my book's conclusion using the work on 'strategic narratives' by Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin [2014; 2017]). A generational account is not the only story we can tell of history, and maybe it is not even the best means of thinking historically. I gave up long ago on finding the "best" explanation or interpretation because we do not really have – despite what some might tell you – a universally agreed upon metric for "best" story. Pointing out issues or shortcomings is fine, of course, but too much of what I see in IR scholarship today is about representing our work as the "best", which normally involves



trashing others in the process. It is more important to tell a compelling, interesting and *useful* story (useful in the sense of providing grounds for conversation and debate). That generational story of the US, looking back to the late 1600s up through the 2010s, is one that I think is compelling, interesting and useful, as it characterises the US as a largely *un-restrained* society. Only one out of every four generations ('reactive' generations, using Strauss and Howe's generational typology [1991]) are 'restrained' in their handling of US foreign policy, as well as their conditioned disposition towards the world. That is not only a simplified narrative, but perhaps an *overly simplified one*. How is it defensible? I see three reasons.

First, it provides us both with a broad format to categorise epochs (breadth) and a way to dive into particularly important fault lines therein. We can recognise and specify the political struggles that ensued as being conditioned by different social and political lifeworlds characterising different generations. Those struggles do not always get resolved peacefully. Second, it is a decent explanation for why the US is so unrestrained over time. The alternation between "moods" or generational cohorts is much more pronounced than in other political communities like, say, Japan or Germany, that also have generations. Yet, third, it also suggests why simple calls for the US to be more "restrained", or to adopt restraint as a 'Grand Strategy' – which some conventional realists and libertarian-minded scholars have called for (Posen, 2014; Gomez et al., 2020) – are only going to be heeded for a very *short* period of time. If such realist scholars actually read my book, or work similar to it, they would, as I note in my conclusion, have a more *realistic* understanding of the challenges of restraint. In my story, psychic energy builds up, it even gets backed up, and it eventually overwhelms the US political community. That action is combined with actionism – views that 'such action re-vitalizes a particular community behind a common cause' (Steele, 2019, p. 75). That too implicates one form of Eliasian theory as expressed especially by Linklater. In my story for the US there really is not much of a 'civilizing process' – while somewhat affirming the other strand of Elias' work, the Established/Outsider dynamics you mention here, the latter being seen over and over and over again.

Peys: When thinking along these lines, and thereby about history as an oscillation between differing generational dynamics/complexes, I also find myself wondering what is possible, politically and historically, if people, groups and nations cannot escape the actionism–restraint relation – a socio-psychological dichotomy in which restraint is the reactionary negation of the original, positive urge to action (as a release of 'psychic energy'). More specifically, as I reflect upon your theory of restraint, as well as your reading of Robert Cox's work (which you invoke when considering the possibilities of altering the international system without first having a successful 'war of positioning'), I cannot help but recall Slavoj Žižek's reading of Herman Melville's short story, 'Bartleby, the scrivener: a story of Wall Street' (1856, pp. 31–107; Žižek, 2006). In particular, it strikes me that Žižek's reading of 'Bartleby' offers us an intriguing means of thinking about the limitations of restraint by casting light on the possibilities of redefining the hierarchical relation between an empowered party and a relatively powerless one. With Žižek's help, that is, it becomes possible to recognise the limits of restraint – as a form of 'going against or resisting something we would otherwise expect to prevail' – precisely because this very notion of 'going against' affirms the original presence, status, power etc. of 'something': actionism.

A story told from the perspective of a Wall Street lawyer (our unnamed Narrator), this is a tale about a man named Bartleby, a 'pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn' copyist who – after diligently and unceremoniously doing several days of work – ceases to do his job as a scrivener, whilst nevertheless continuing to come to work, or, as we eventually learn, never leaving the office at all (Žižek, 2006, pp. 45–48). Rather than follow the directions of his employer, Bartleby began to shirk his duties, doing so not necessarily as an act of rebellion or resistance to authority but because – as he states – 'I would prefer not to'. Why does Bartleby not wish to complete his task,



and why does he refuse his employer's requests, pleas and commands? Because he 'prefers not to'. According to Žižek, Bartleby's action – his stance of 'I would prefer not to' – is an act of defiance *par excellence*, as it is a political action that allows him to occupy a position of exteriority outwith the structure of power maintained between lawyer and clerk, boss and employee, hegemon and subaltern. As Žižek writes:

In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of 'resistance' of 'protestation,' which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation. (Ibid., pp. 381–382)

For Žižek, Bartleby's obstinance instigates a 'parallax shift', opening a new space and 'forming a new alternative order' unconstrained by the trappings of the older order of power; this is a 'move from something to nothing, from the gap between two "somethings" to the gap that separates a something from nothing, from the void of its own place' (ibid., p. 382). Within your framing of actionism and restraint, two complexes ordered according to the (libidinal) power of the former, can we ever make such a 'move', which is to say, 'shift' from the circuit of power and resistance outlined by the dialectic (?) of the predicate that is actionism and its negation, restraint? That is to ask, is there room for Bartleby? What happens if we cannot open a 'gap that separates a something from a nothing'? Would an act of restraint – or a 'strategic narrative of restraint' – ultimately serve to re-affirm the overwhelming power of actionism?

Steele: Well, Žižek is a good storyteller but ultimately one that lives in la-la land. For someone who draws from Lacan, he would do well to read more about fantasy and its functions. Bartleby is a nice fantasy but it is not remotely an option we have. If anything, I find more inspiration in how scholars use Žižek as a starting point to develop their own creative expressions. The gist of where Žižek is coming from is also the point of the film *Office Space* (1999), but the latter is far more entertaining than anything Žižek could say about the 'hegemonic position and its negation'. I mention that knowing I am offending a lot of people out there. "How to challenge the hegemonic position without reifying it" is the basis for at least one question issued to every conference presenter who calls themselves "critical". I wait for that question when I attend conference panels, and then I am excited by it because that is my cue to leave and go to the pub instead.

Digression done, your question is, like many who invoke Žižek, much more interesting than Žižek himself. And the answer to whether restraint re-affirms the overwhelming power of actionism is "yes, it does", but that says far more about actionism, its embeddedness in late modern global capitalism, and its toxic grip on many of us, than it does about anything else. We cannot escape it. Wanting to escape it is a nice fantasy. But the hegemony of actionism remains there and the people who have the power to justify actionism (especially violent expressions of such) will be there whether we try, temporarily (and that is all it would be) to "displace" it like Bartleby. And when we ignore who has the power to perpetuate and justify violent actionism, we are also ignoring who does not, and the latter are usually on the receiving end of that violence.

Related to what I mentioned above, I would suggest we instead use the perennial, *ancient* struggle presented by psychic energy as something that binds all of us together. And then rather than asymmetrically holding groups accountable for actionism while looking the other way when its violently wielded by those in power, we might think of ways to valorise restraint as *its own form of action*.



We should also consider how certain moments of actionism by particular groups, fleeting though they may be, are rooted in that precise asymmetry of the politics of restraint. It is an asymmetry which has prevented them institutional outlets for addressing and expressing in a legitimate way their psychic energy – jobs, legal protections, freedom of movement, bodily autonomy and so on. In those moments, we should not tell marginalised groups to just be restrained. They have been practising restraint for a *long* time and they know how to keep practising it. My book's concluding chapter is an attempt to try to get to a valorisation of restraint by *dominant* groups all the way down. But it does not pose the challenge in as stark of terms as you have here. And maybe it should have.

Nevertheless, Bartleby's option is not one any of us have. I find this kind of thinking by Žižek to be deeply anti-political. While he is writing about all of this and seeking a way to escape politics, the rest of us are here inside of politics and trying to change it all from within. Exit is not a damn option. And what happens to Bartleby? He gets sent to a prison and dies, refusing to even eat the food the Narrator arranges for him to receive. Our political struggles right now are so urgent. We cannot sit back and let them unfold. But we also should not interpret restraint as sitting back either. It is a holding back of ourselves to enable *others to be part of politics*. Especially those who have been excluded, ignored, *erased* as unworthy of having a political voice.

Peys: Here, too, your framing of restraint very much strikes a chord with me, as this conceptualisation of restraint – this notion of restraint as 'enabl[ing] others to be part of politics' – has much normative appeal, most especially at a time when, perhaps (and hopefully), humanity is in the midst of working to address deeply engrained forms of systemic injustice. Specifically, at least for me, it is quite appealing to think about restraint as an action that contributes to the dilation of "the political", or the opening of the space for politics, and thus, to recognise the power of restraint in the development of new – and hopefully more just, equal and democratic – worlds of social, economic and political action.

Before tackling a discussion of your theory in relation to several of our world's current crises, I very much hoped that you might comment a bit more on this line of thought, and speak specifically about the sub-theme of violence – and the possibility of conceptualising restraint as a (non)violent practice – that appears in various manifestations throughout *RinIP*. I have two main queries/comments about the theme of (non)violence. The first pertains to the ways in which restraint can be understood as a form of 'nonviolent resistance' (Steele, 2019, p. 79), while the second is one that revolves around your considerations of the 'historical (ab)uses of restraint', and the ways in which practices of restraint have contributed to the legitimisation of 'violence by setting up, implicitly or explicitly, a value hierarchy [...] so that other (worse) chaos and violence don't ensue' (ibid., p. 104).

In your initial discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr's notion of 'irony' (2008; Steele, 2019, pp. 78–79) – which you supplement with a reinterpretation of David Cortright's understanding of 'pragmatic pacifism' (2008; Steele, 2019, pp. 79–80) – you suggest that restraint is akin to a 'pragmatic' form of 'nonviolent resistance'. Here, I think it is important to appropriate Cortright's notion of 'pragmatic pacifism' – as such an alignment provides us with an instrumental means of avoiding the conceptual pitfalls associated with principle-based theories of non-violence – but, I wonder, then, what is non-violence? And how should we understand the relationship between violence and non-violence? If restraint is akin to a form of 'nonviolent resistance', and if 'almost any conflict, tension, dilemma or anxiety in global politics [...] has its origins in the politics of restraint' (ibid., p. 2), then it would follow – at least in some sense – that the 'struggles we find in global politics are really struggles over [non-violence]'. I might, perhaps, be overemphasising your point(s) about 'nonviolent resistance'. When thinking in terms of the Christian notion of *agape* and a Gandhian theory of non-violence (one which is thoroughly principled and unapologetically ethical), however, we enter into difficult territories: a discussion about the politics of non-violence. We do so not least because – as Simon



Critchley observes – ‘the plausibility of a politics of nonviolence [...] [forces one] to negotiate the limits of nonviolence’, as well as to determine ‘in what circumstances it might become necessary to transgress those limits’ (2012, p. 207). Moreover, because ‘every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*’ (Derrida, 2001, p. 400, n. 21), we must also be willing to consider what Judith Butler describes as the ‘paradoxical possibility of a nonviolent violence’ (2006, pp. 201–202), and thereby, to recognise that ‘non-violence is not a peaceful state, but a social and political struggle’ (Butler, 2009, p. 182; 2020). As a form of ‘nonviolent resistance’, how, then, should we understand restraint within an ‘economy of violence’, or theorise the ‘politics of restraint’ in terms of the ethico-political contestation of violence and non-violence? Is restraint, paradoxically speaking, a non-violent violent reaction?

Steele: Another great question, and set-up to the question. I will answer some of this here and some below. For now, recall that restraint and actionism are interdependent complexes; it is one of the assertions I make on occasion throughout the book. This does not always render restraint as a positive, “good” thing. In some ways, it authorises really bad stuff. In the historical abuses chapter that you reference, I mention that forms of governance that imposed “restraining” measures against groups – women, immigrants, persons of colour – were legitimised because (1) the measures (and the authorities imposing them) were deemed as restrained compared to other more forceful measures and (2) the targeted group was represented as incapable of restraint, thus authorising others to restrain them. So, that is a case of violence that *seems* “non-violent” but nevertheless is problematic; here, restraint is violent.

Another example discussed in that chapter and the following one, in the US context especially, was lynching, something we can or should all agree is decidedly *not* restrained. And yet, the people participating in lynchings, or who perpetuate them, mainly (although not solely) “Christian” whites, were otherwise “restrained” in their lifestyles. Niebuhr supposedly once called this out with what I find to be a great example of this hypocrisy, although I am still not 100% sure he is the source of the quote: ‘If there were a drunken orgy somewhere, I would bet ten to one a church member was not in it. But if there were a lynching, I would bet ten to one a church member was in it.’³

Restraint/actionism today: Black Lives Matter (BLM), COVID-19 and climate change

Peys: Whether or not Niebuhr made this point, its force is nevertheless felt (and very much so at a time when BLM protesters have only recently taken to the streets on the blocks adjacent to my home in Los Angeles), and to reflect upon (non)violence and restraint along these lines is to segue rather seamlessly into my second query about violence and your theory of international political restraint. This is to consider how restraint can also be a (violent) form of ‘discipline and power, legitimized through moral discourses lorded over certain groups who require restraint because of their differential (in)abilities to restrain themselves’ (Steele, 2019, p. 205).

At a time when communities across the United States – and around the globe – are feeling the effects of the violent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many other black people, I was hoping you might elaborate on the disciplining power of restraint. Having watched the footage of Floyd’s killing under the knee of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin (as well as so many other instances of police brutality), it is difficult not to think about the manifold ways in which restraint has been “(ab)used” as a means of policing, enforcing and maintaining what W.E.B. Du Bois famously suggests is the ‘problem of the Twentieth Century’: this is the ‘problem of the color-line’ (2007 [1903], p. 3). What does it mean to put into practice a strategic narrative of restraint when practices of restraint have historically been abused? Furthermore, if the police, for



instance, continue to act in the mode of what Randall Collins describes as a 'forward panic' – which is a highly charged emotional state that corresponds with a 'violence that for the time being is unstoppable' (2008, p. 94) – is the 'nonviolent resistance' of restraint enough to change an unjust status quo?⁴ What do you think the struggles over the 'problem of the color-line' say about the American sense of Self? Here, despite being a complete coincidence, I cannot help but think about the symbolism of a white police officer named Chauvin becoming internationally infamous for his brutal display of power – an act of restraint that embodied the American legacy of racial injustice – and what that says about the (white) supremacy engrained in American life: the chauvinism of Derek Chauvin, what does it mean and how does it affirm the presence of the 'color-line' in communities across the United States?

Steele: All very good questions. You have captured the struggle for restraint in a nutshell and in the context of the current worldwide protests. It is not easy to be restrained when the humanity of groups, especially black lives, have been denied, ignored and erased for so long. And what has sustained some of that has been, in part, the asymmetric politics of restraint. White supremacist violence is justified by the discourse of restraining groups, who supposedly cannot restrain themselves, and for the "benefit" of society. And this violence is fuelled by insecurity and anxiety at the intersection of sex, gender and race.

With both the pandemic (which we will get to momentarily) and these protests, I have been thinking a lot about the politics of restraint. Most of the time when you finish a book you try to get away from it for a while. But it is so front and centre in 2020. And I like that you call protests 'non-violent' instead of "peaceful", as it gets to the *power* of non-violent action and civil disobedience. Expecting protests to be "peaceful" is naïve. Protests disrupt, they challenge, they disturb. Non-violent protests especially so. That power is also on display as a contrast to the more conventional, and more violent, oppressor that is being resisted or protested. But let me begin by putting the dynamics of the protests in the language of my Jungian approach.

First, you have at least two sources of psychic energy "build-up" that have led to the sustained protests as a form of actionism. One of these is obviously the sheltering that occurred because of COVID-19. But people that only focus on this one are missing the deeper more historical build-up of psychic energy associated with the oppression that the white supremacist order has imposed: this is a violence that extends across many US institutions and throughout US society. This is also a build-up of libidinal energy that extends outside of the US. It is this build-up of psychic energy that was activated by the George Floyd killing. Notice I say 'activated' rather than caused, as the protests are also a good example that the politics of restraint is not causal, but rather as I mention via Jung *synchronic*.⁵ The build-up is already there, and while George Floyd's horrifying murder activated it, the full breadth and depth of the protests can only be understood as reflecting and expressing wider historical processes and reservoirs of psychic energy. Both types of build-up – spatial and historical – were evident in other cases of racial protests or riots such as Watts in 1965 and LA in 1992, as I also discuss in my book.

Second, and returning to your question about the efficacy of non-violence, while the protests are a form of actionism, what has made them effective, I would argue, is precisely their disciplined, restrained and *sustained* nature. It is, furthermore, the juxtaposition between protesters who show up, night after night, in their civilian clothes, facing down heavily militarised police forces that have demonstrated to the world the power of non-violent, restrained resistance. So, your question here is understandable but I think also, as a statement, one that sells the powerful impact of non-violent protest as *restraint* just a bit short:



Furthermore, if the police, for instance, continue to act in the mode of what Randall Collins describes as a 'forward panic' – which is a highly charged emotional state that corresponds with a 'violence that for the time being is unstoppable' – is the 'nonviolent resistance' of restraint enough to change an unjust status quo?

The nature of the problem with the US, and I would also say global racism, again, is deeper than Chauvin or the Minneapolis Police Department. It is historical. It is systemic. It is *structural*. The 'it's just a few bad apples' explanation that Trump often provided is a convenient one because it only focuses on the individual, agentic level; however, it ignores entirely the systemic, structural character of this problem.⁶ Such a framing is also a convenient way to do the bare minimum to address the issue, and a discourse that I hear even from "progressive" whites in the US.

But what the protests have done is call that discourse into question, empty it of its convenience, and it is *precisely* because, again, of their sustained and restrained nature of protest activity. On social media and on cable networks, throughout the summer of 2020, one saw clips of heavily armed and protected police officers overreacting to protesters, committing acts of absolutely unprovoked and *unrestrained* violence. And, across all those cases, this has put the local governments on the defensive, forcing them to at least think about holding their police departments accountable in a way that I do not recall happening even with the LAPD after the Rodney King beating in 1991.

Further, in reaction to such accountability, we have seen a number of police either resign (as in Buffalo) or simply not show up to work (as in Atlanta) in an act of "solidarity" with their accused 'Thin Blue Line' colleagues who were under investigation. So, that also complicates the 'a few bad apples' argument quite markedly. If the "good apples" cannot even support the accountability of the 'bad apples' then that implicates the system and not just the individual perpetrator.

Further still, Confederate monuments are coming down throughout the South.⁷ The US military has also considered renaming forts and other installations originally named after former Confederate Generals (Bowman, 2020). Additionally, there is renewed debate in certain former Confederate states about removing the Confederate emblem from state flags, and NASCAR has banned the Confederate flag from all their racetracks and events.

Finally, US public opinion on Black Lives Matter has flipped, with majority support (Cohn and Quealy, 2020). Again, I think the protests have a lot to do with all of this, and it has been their restrained, *sustained* features that have precisely brought about these changes. And while these changes are largely, thus far, symbolic, there is a lot of substance in symbolism.

Peys: Because it seems we are currently experiencing a society-wide complex, I was very much wondering how long might such a complex last? Here, I suppose I am curious about the temporality of complexes, and what that means for our understanding of recent events. Relatedly, and to think about how the #blacklivesmatter movement (BLM) has a global reach, is it possible to have a worldwide complex?

Steele: Absolutely we see complexes worldwide. I think we see them in terms of any global process. The global capitalist system is definitely prone to actionism and restraint. The global racial hierarchical order that has been present for centuries (I dig into the particular inflection point of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) is now experiencing a pushback in the form of protest. How long could it last? I must say I am surprised, and somewhat heartened and inspired, with how sustained and widespread the protests have been. But complexes last as long as they last until another one dislodges them. So, the cadence is different depending on our time frame. Generational cycles are different than our yearly/seasonal cycles, but what is consistent across all of those is the relationship between actionism and restraint. An actionist complex emerges as



a rebellion against a restrained one and vice-versa. How long will this one last? It is hard to say, but I think the aforementioned 'build-ups' have been formidable, and what we are seeing now is a sustained expression or release that could, and perhaps should, last some time and until more institutional (re)sources for psychic energy expression can emerge out of the old ones which denied that expression to certain groups.

Peys: In your book, you write about restraint and the politics of (global) health. Seeing that your text was published just months before the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission officially reported a cluster of pneumonia cases (which we later learned were associated with a new coronavirus, COVID-19), I am very curious to know what your take on COVID-19 is and how you think your analytical framework of restraint helps us to understand global politics at this challenging time. How do you understand this aspect of contemporary global affairs as an issue of restraint/actionism? And, if I might be so bold as to ask for a more predictive statement, where do you see us going from here?

Steele: As I mentioned earlier, all of the events of 2020 (so far) have had me returning to thinking about restraint, so I appreciate this question especially.

There are four aspects in particular I have been noticing. In today's discussions over Covid, there are so many echoes, first, of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century eugenics discourses, which I explored in the sixth chapter of *RinIP*. The eugenics discourses justified culling or removing people from society whose inefficiencies (for lack of a better term) were holding society back. Furthermore, those people were additionally problematic because of 'differential fecundity' – they were thought to be predisposed towards higher rates of procreation *and* to engage in more unrestrained behaviour. So, not only did those groups of people not contribute to society, they were reproducing more of their "kind" and flooding the gene pool. Forced sterilisation and institutionalisation, to name but two forceful measures against these groups, were common ways to remove these groups from broader society.

Very early on, the thinking about Covid from the limited (and we now know, not particularly reliable) data coming out of China was that it was only the very old who were susceptible to Covid. For most other people, it was mild to "moderate". The exceptions were people with pre-existing conditions. This was reassuring to many: "I'm not old and I'm pretty healthy so I should be fine". Of course, there were all kinds of problems with this wishful thinking. The "healthy" people can transmit the disease to the vulnerable. And it is the former who are more active and have more reckless social routines, and thus "healthy" people aid the transmission of this coronavirus even faster. While we now know that Covid still kills even "healthy" people (and if it does not, it can inflict lasting damage on them), the reporting of Covid numbers nevertheless continues to disclose deaths by demographic or pre-existing condition, thereby reinforcing an outdated, dangerous understanding about this disease: that it is only certain sections of the population under threat and that normal, "healthy" people are/will be fine.

What is the result of that kind of demographic and health category parsing? In short, it results in a reification of a type of neo-eugenics discourse. Lock away the old and vulnerable and let the productive members of society get on with their lives.⁸ Some have even gone further, arguing that the old and vulnerable could be sacrificed for the greater good of economic recovery.⁹ Another category of reporting has emerged that has further sought to cauterise the pandemic: that of reporting on "outbreaks" at either long-term care facilities (older people) and/or workplaces where outbreaks are potentially likely (as a result of certain working conditions), such as meatpacking facilities.¹⁰ And just as eugenics discourses circulated in the first quarter of the 1900s, when – for a time – white countries began heavily restricting immigration, so too has there been an underlying



indifference to *who* works in those meatpacking facilities and is susceptible to superspreader events; these more at-risk persons are, largely, first-generation immigrants.¹¹

Second, the above is also a result of the fact that there remains so much actionism embedded in US society, and people are looking for excuses to stop being restrained. So, telling themselves that it is “only the old” who are dying is one way to do that. In a darker, more sinister way, but just like the era of eugenics, they may also think that this is a big “culling” of society and that their communities will be stronger as a result. Such thinking is both wishful – in the sense that Covid makes even the once “healthy” survivors unhealthy – and appalling, because it renders entire groups of people ‘superfluous’, where the ‘logic of superfluity is not merely to kill people, but to dehumanise them [...] to deny that they are anything more than manipulable and expendable matter’ (Hayden, 2007, p. 284; Hayden, 2009).

Globally, sheltering in place was an example of a widespread moment of restraint. This moment lasted longer and was more effective in some countries and less so in others. Like all forms of restraint, it still entailed movement, or channelling, of psychic energy. Sometimes this channelling became routinised in ways that helped attend to the ontological security of individuals and groups. That is, the examples from Italy, where people would sing from their homes every evening, or the UK, where ‘Clap for Carers’ each evening showed support for the NHS, helped to ground and fasten otherwise anxious or seemingly dislocated political communities. For others, the channelling happened through more basic, mundane routines like walking. I live in a walkable neighbourhood of Salt Lake City, and I walk it a lot with my dog. For the first six weeks of the sheltering, I had never seen so many people out and about on foot: families, younger people, teenagers jogging with their parents.

But it was telling that this channelling was not a good enough replacement for some. And so, in the United States, cases have spiked more now than ever before as people simply go back to not only their productive patterns (of work) but also, and perhaps more so, the consumptive patterns that they have been denied: getting haircuts, shopping, going to pubs, churches, beaches, the mall, restaurants and casinos.

When reflecting on my first two points, the third aspect to note here is the gendered dynamics of (un)restrained action, particularly the politics of masculinity and how it shapes both restrained and actionist complexes. That is, we must recall that both of our complexes – restrained and the actionist – are “masculinised”. Back in March, global health scholar, Professor Sophie Harman, posted a nice, succinct, informative lecture on the politics of global health, especially the gendered aspects of it (2020). I immediately distributed this to my undergraduate students, and in my global public health and IR lecture for the course, I referenced this as: ‘the dudes in our country are going to be the ones losing their patience and being more reckless’. And this is, sadly, what has played out exponentially in the US. The need to uphold an especially actionist form of masculinity translates to less mask-wearing, fewer precautions, and generally more risky behaviour. The problem, of course, is that this is endangering the people who *are* being cautious, who *are* being restrained.

And thus, I am led back to the animating reason I wrote the book in the first place: actionism is destroying the United States and an actionist United States is impacting the world adversely. We need a strategic narrative of restraint more now than before, perhaps even more than when I wrote the book.

Fourth, and finally, just as there was in the Global Financial Crisis that I examine in chapter six, there was, in the United States, a depressingly predictable handling of the anticipated economic fallout by panic-shovelling huge amounts of money to, on the one hand, corporations (with little, if any, oversight). On the other hand, while there were enhancements to unemployment insurance in the



US, which kept people at home so that sheltering could happen, very quickly there were stories about how these people were not going back to work because the unemployment insurance – enhanced though it may have been, it was still pretty modest – was ‘too generous’ (Semerad, 2020), and thus, the argument goes, that ‘Paycheck Protection Program’ creates ‘very little incentive to return to work’ (Luther, 2020; Goger, Loh and Bateman, 2020). In terms of the American response to Covid, then, the former – the “makers” of the corporate world – were not remotely put under such scrutiny.

Peys: On this whistle-stop tour of your theory of restraint and how you are presently conceptualising our world’s current crises, one final area of inquiry about which I would be keen to hear your thoughts is that of the environment. You briefly discuss the environment, particularly climate change, within your book’s conclusion, doing so – specifically – as a part of your theorisation of how a strategic use of restraint can help political actors foster the ‘detachment’ needed to understand the ‘ambiguities of interconnectedness’¹² that exist at ‘all levels and at all times among all peoples throughout history’ (Steele, 2019, p. 258). This is a point you connect with the politics of climate change when you write:

For all of the despair, rightfully so, regarding the seeming intractability of global problems, we have some evidence that detachment is possible, and with regard to one of the most urgent problems of today, climate change. (Ibid.)

How can your analytical framework of actionism and restraint help us understand questions pertaining to the environment, and in what ways might a putting into practice of restraint contribute to the implementation of meaningful, sustainable environmental actions?

Steele: This is probably the biggest and most challenging issue for putting into practice a politics of restraint. I have to say that the experience with the pandemic has pulled me into two directions regarding climate change. On the one hand, widescale change can happen, and happen quickly, in the face of a global threat. But that kind of restraint is difficult to maintain and sustain. The United States is of course the most extreme example. But it is not only about agents. Alternatively, as is captured by one of the main precepts of my book, restraint involves both agents and structures. Confronting climate change requires restraint, as well as a channelling of both production and consumption into cleaner alternatives. Can climate change be so confronted while a major source generating greenhouse gases is the global capitalist system? I am not hopeful, as that system itself is held together by the routines, practices and identities of billions, and disproportionately sustained by the most powerful forces of capital itself.

If meaningful, lasting climate action is going to happen, it will likely be from a combination of the types of interdependencies we have seen that result from actionism and restraint, in perhaps two ways. One less hopeful and much more costly possibility is a global climate catastrophe that radically impacts the industrialised north, followed by a reformation of the system. In the ashes of catastrophe, that is, we might see a more restrained expression of libidinal energy counteract the actionism associated with global capitalism, which – as we very well know – has historically been channelled, unleashed and/or expressed for the sake of unfettered economic development and the further growth of (global) capital.

Another, perhaps less radical and more immediate, possibility is found in the work of Matt McDonald (2018), among others (see, for instance: Dalby, 2009; Barnett, Matthew and O’Brien, 2010; Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald, 2014; Burke, Lee-Koo and McDonald, 2016). McDonald argues that an ‘ecological security discourse’ should combine not only the restraining approaches of reducing greenhouse gases, but also a bringing forth of ‘progressive discourses of climate security [...]



underpinned by defensible ethical assumptions and encouraging effective responses to climate change' (2018, p. 153). He points to 'geoengineering' as one of these responses; geoengineering – as a form of 'artificially changing the atmosphere in ways that will counteract the enhanced warming effects of carbon dioxide and methane' (Dalby, 2015; McDonald, 2018, p. 171) – is not, as McDonald suggests (2018, pp. 171–172), 'just a practical question, but a moral one' that 'prioritize[s] precaution in the first instance, along with the development of adaptive capacity for already vulnerable populations'. This, to me, combines restraint and actionism, which I think is probably a combination that could, perhaps, resonate with wider groups and especially emerging generations who take climate change more seriously than any others.

Closing remarks: a joint statement about restraint and 'caring for the world'

To consider the politics of restraint within the context of today's world – and to examine, thereby, issues such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent race-related movements that have swept the globe – is to investigate a contemporary series of interrelated crises in terms of a socio-psychological approach to the movement(s) of libidinal, 'psychic energy' that constantly flow through political agents and structures. More specifically, it is in terms of a Steelean understanding of actionism and restraint – the two 'complexes' theorised throughout *RinIP* – that moments of crisis can be understood as 'struggles over restraint', and that such crises can also be conceptualised in relation to the manifold forms of (structurally) violent '(ab)uses' of restraint that have historically shaped the international political system. From this perspective, then, Steele's Eliasian-inspired, Jungian conceptualisation of restraint provides us with an analytical pathway for narrating, or re-narrating, moments of crisis, and therefore (re)telling – or '(re)chronicling' – a 'history of the present'. We can, that is, narrate how the libidinal urge to action(ism) has historically (not) been channelled, unleashed and/or obstructed within political agents *and* the array of social structures that condition the existence of how such actors exist (spatially, temporally and metaphysically). In other words, we can study how crises, and 'human action' more broadly, are 'demarcated, (archi)textured, and conditioned by constructed meanings' that are shaped by a 'libidinal psychic energy [that] is always there, always flowing, or when backed up, always looking for an outlet' (Steele, 2019, pp. 41, 60). During times of crisis, when 'struggles of restraint' are arguably most pronounced, and perhaps when the stakes of (in)action are most high, there is consequently a need to consider how we understand the socio-psychological urge to act, as well as what it means for us to act in a restrained manner and, thus, to oppose effectively the libido's desire for actionism.

How do we do this? What does this putting into action of a politics of restraint *do* for scholars and practitioners of (global) politics? And what actions can we subsequently take in the wake of resisting the libidinal pull of actionism? Steele suggests that we put into practice a 'strategic narrative of restraint', whereby – in an effort to go forward (though not in terms of Collins' actionist mode of 'forward panic') – we should take steps to slow down, pause and listen by focusing, or refocusing, our psychic energies (*ibid.*, p. 255). Specifically, there is a need to cultivate a sense of detachment capable of disrupting the 'cadence' of life in late modernity, which he contends can be achieved during moments of crisis by reciting, as if a type of "mantra," Niebuhr's 'Serenity prayer':

God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. (*ibid.*, pp. 257–261; Sifton, 1998, p. 16)

A seemingly simple practice, the recitation of this prayer – if understood as an act of non-violent resistance of an ever-present, deeply felt urge to action(ism) – has immense force: this is the power to assert, at least to some extent, 'control over one's self and one's immediate others' (Steele,



2019, p. 260). A type of affirmation, one with the intent of fundamentally redirecting any panicked feelings of anxiety and psychologically tuned proclivities towards actionism, “praying” in this manner puts a stop to what Critchley describes – in a slightly different language – as the ‘wheel of violence and counterviolence [that] spins without end and leads inevitably to destruction’ (2011, §6). What a ‘strategic narrative of restraint’ does, then, is to interrupt – even if only temporarily, and for the briefest of moments – vicious cycles of (violent) action, effectively thwarting and diverting the libidinal, ‘psychic energy’ that Steele suggests is ‘destroying the United States’ and, ultimately, ‘impacting the world adversely’: this is the urge to actionism. This disruption, or at least slowing of the libidinally primed ‘wheel of violence and counterviolence’, creates – from a moment of “struggle” born of the experience of crisis – a political opening, an opportunity, a space in time to do something new. In this sense, and to draw upon Arendt’s understanding of “the political”, as well as her related notion of natality, practising a strategic narrative of restraint creates the conditions of what – in Arendtian terms – corresponds to the doing of politics itself: the activity of “action” and what Arendt suggests is a matter of beginning, acting freely and (re)cultivating power.

To think along these lines is to shift our focus – though not in the sense of the ‘parallax shift’ outlined by Žižek in his reading of Melville’s ‘Bartleby’ – from a consideration of the politics of restraint to that of a politics *instigated* by acts of restraint, whereby restraint can be said to (re) open¹³ “the political” when agents and structures might otherwise be expected to succumb to the hegemonic power of the actionist ‘complex’. Within the temporal space opened by a successful practice of a ‘strategic narrative of restraint’, and thus as a consequence of opposing the unleashing of actionism, we might, for instance, begin to think about forms of action devoted to repairing, maintaining and preserving the web of relationships that constitute and condition the political realm. This is not to say that there is either a singular or ideal means of theorising this moment of opening but, rather, that the act of restraint allows us to consider the yet to come – or that which comes next – free from the overwhelming grip of actionism, and subsequently to pursue alternative courses of action that ‘enable others to be part of politics’, most ‘especially those who have been excluded, ignored, [or] erased as unworthy of having a political voice’ (Steele, 2019). Restraint is, therefore, an act integral to the initial process of channelling libidinal impulses into the creation of new beginnings, most especially – as Peys suggests in his work on Arendt’s notion of ‘care for the world’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 254; Arendt, 1968, p. 14) – in the sense that it is important to care for the narrative spaces of public action that constitute “the political” (Peys, 2020). If we wish to ‘care for the world’, consequently founding and (re)developing spaces of political action, we need restraint to impede, suspend and repurpose the ‘psychic energy’ of actionism. And though – as Arendt reminds us – politics is inherently unpredictable (1958, pp. 243–247), it is our belief that restraint can contribute to creative, willed (re)expressions of the libido and, potentially, the (re)creation of a public, political realm that is ‘more democratic, hospitable, and capable of holding a true plurality of [political] storytellers’ (Peys, 2020, p. 100). In short, restraint and ‘caring for the world’ go hand in hand.

When understood in terms of public, political ‘care’, or perhaps as a precursor to acts of ‘caring for the world’, Steele’s ‘strategic narrative of restraint’ helps us resist – and potentially overcome – the complex of actionism that is so deeply engrained in late modernity, a period of human history when an intense sense of speed and ‘forward panic’ are seemingly hardwired, both sociologically and psychologically, into the contemporary experience of the human condition. Considering the ways in which this sense of speed conditions entirely how human beings experience capitalism today, humanity will continue to ‘panic’ forward if actionism is not counteracted, and people, if they are not more *care*-ful, will therefore continue – as Paul Virilio suggests – ‘rushing headlong into the wall of time’ (Virilio and Armitage, 2001, p. 185). And what are the consequences? They will destroy themselves, driving at an uncontrollable speed – as if racing a libidinally powered supercar – down a motorway that has been (socially) constructed with little thought for how people might react



in hazardous conditions, and/or when they might find themselves about to collide with another “motorist”.

Given the rough terrain of our current sociopolitical landscape, perhaps it is time to find the exit ramp. But how do we locate the off-ramp when “driving” at high speeds, when everything around us is a blur of motion? As outlined in *RinIP*, perhaps we should consider “praying”, not necessarily in a religious sense but, rather, as an act of serenity, of taking a moment for reflection, or pausing, so that we might see our “exit”. That is, we might think about and practise – for the sake of ourselves, others, and the “road” shared with others – restraint. And if we can slow down to a more manageable, safe speed, we might be able to discover new roads, pathways or possibilities for dealing with questions of (systemic) violence, widespread forms of disease, and more sustainable means of caring for our common home: our shared planet.

Notes

¹. Emphasis was added to this quotation. Eleven days after the death of George Floyd, the MPD agreed to update this policy (Navratil, 2020), with a complete ‘prohibition on neck restraints and choke holds’ coming into effect on 9 June 2020 (Minneapolis Police Department, 2020; State of Minnesota, 2020, pp. 4–5).

². Within the context of Arendt’s tripartite conceptualisation of the *vita activa*, or ‘active life’ (which is outlined most notably in her 1958 book entitled, *The human condition*), ‘action’ – as distinguished from ‘labour’ and ‘work’ – is the highest, more thoroughly human form of activity. For Arendt, action corresponds with the doing of politics: the speaking and acting of a plurality of distinct but equal persons in the public realm.

³. While Robert Moats Miller attributes this quote to Niebuhr, doing so in an article entitled ‘The Protestant churches and lynching’ (1957), Steele is sceptical of the quote’s origins for two reasons. First, because all other references to this quote only cite Miller, and Miller never provided a date or source for the quote in this article other than Niebuhr. Second, the origins of this quotation are questionable because Niebuhr was otherwise almost completely silent on lynching, which is something James H. Cone famously highlights in *The cross and the lynching tree* (2011).

⁴. It is significant to note that Collins presents the 1991 Rodney King beating in Los Angeles as an ‘archetypal’ example of his notion of ‘forward panic’, and he goes so far as to suggest that ‘most incidents of police violence that create public scandals have the character of forward panic’ (2008, p. 88).

⁵. Steele notes that synchronicity is understood by Jung as ‘meaningful coincidences’ connected by ‘simultaneity and meaning’ (2019, p. 58).

⁶. During a talk on the police and race, which took place on 11 June 2020 in Dallas, TX, Trump stated: ‘You always have a bad apple wherever you go – you have bad apples. There are not too many of them in the police department, but we all know a lot of members of the police’ (*The New York Times* [Video]).

⁷. As of 26 June 2020, *The Washington Post* reports that ‘over 80 monuments have come down from public land since the Charleston, SC church shooting in 2015, nearly a third of them in the weeks since George Floyd was killed in police custody’ (Berkowitz and Blanco, 2020, §1).



⁸. This is a position outlined by Tucker Carlson – an American, right-wing political commentator employed by *Fox News* – when he states: ‘For most people, going to work can’t be more dangerous than buying produce at Safeway twice a week. And if it is more dangerous, tell us how it is [...] and be specific when you’re describing that. Otherwise, it’s time to start caring about the entire population – healthy people are suffering badly too’ (2020).

⁹. During a television interview with *Fox News* (one which took place on 23 March 2020), the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, claimed that grandparents and senior citizens, such as himself, would be ‘willing to take a chance on [his/their] survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for [our] children and grandchildren’, and that he did not wish ‘to see the [United States] sacrificed’ by falling into ‘economic collapse’ (Rodriguez, 2020; Coughlin and Yoquinto, 2020).

¹⁰. Speaking about care facilities in the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson recently stated: ‘We discovered too many care homes didn’t really follow the procedures in the way that they could have, but we’re learning lessons the whole time. Most important is to fund them properly [...] but we will also be looking at mak[ing] sure the care sector, long term, is properly organised and supported’ (Walker, Proctor and Syal, 2020).

¹¹. In early May, a Republican judge in the US state of Wisconsin remarked that the surge in cases in her area was ‘due to the meatpacking – that’s where Brown County got the flare. It wasn’t just the *regular folks* in Brown County’ (Milwaukee Supreme Court / Case #2020AP765-OA; Bice, 2020).

¹². On this point, Steele draws upon Andrew Linklater’s work, namely *The problem of harm in world politics: theoretical investigations* (2011).

¹³. At a time when communities around the globe are considering when and how to “reopen” in the wake of COVID-19, the authors of this article invoke this notion with intent, which is to say, that they recognise the significance of this play on words and what it means to suggest that restraint will be the key to reopening successfully the world, global economies etc.

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