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# Exploring the Love Triangle of Authoritarianism, Populism, and COVID-19 Through Political Ecology: Time for a Break-Up?

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Authoritarian and populist regimes have used the coronavirus pandemic as another excuse to further push back on democracy. Through the lens of boundary-making, we discuss power processes in pandemic politics of three countries whose governments and power constellations rely on authoritarian and/or populist politics (Hungary, Nicaragua, and Guatemala). Our aim is to envision the conceptual and practical possibilities for breaking up the unhealthy love relationship amid pandemic politics, authoritarianism, and populism, and for ultimately dismantling all three. On the basis of secondary data, personal communications, and our lived experiences, we analyze pandemic politics in authoritarian and populist contexts, exploring their ambiguous and co-constitutive effects through three apparent contradictions. First, we discuss control, or the ways in which the framing of the pandemic by authoritarian and populist regimes as an emergency, a quasi-war situation, or an excuse for political opportunism entails an attempt to justify command-and-control policies upon public behavior, intimate daily life, and subject classification. However, these control measures also bring about contestation through self-quarantine calls, accountability-driven demands of epidemiological data, and/or counter-narratives. Second, we engage with the contradiction of knowledge, by pointing out how authoritarian knowledge politics regarding the pandemic are based on over-centralized decision-making processes, manipulation of epidemiological data, and the silencing of unauthorized voices. Simultaneously, these measures are challenged and resisted by counter-knowledge alternatives on pandemic data and the struggles for subaltern forms of knowledge that could make relevant contributions to public health. Third, we discuss the contradiction of subjectivation processes. Authoritarian regimes make extraordinary efforts to draw a line between those bodies and subjects that deserve state protection and those that do not. In this situation, multiple forms of exclusion intersect and are reinforced based on ethnic, political, national, and gender differences. The manipulation of emotions is crucial in these divisions, often creating "worthy" and "unworthy" subjects. This highlights interconnectedness among vulnerabilities and emphasizes how care and solidarity are important elements in defying authoritarian populism. Finally, we conclude by proposing strategies that would allow political

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ecology to support prospects of emancipation for social justice, desperately needed in a pandemic-prone foreseeable future.

**Keywords: authoritarianism, populism, COVID-19, boundary-making, political ecology, knowledge, subjectivities, emotions**

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to unprecedented and related forces across the world (Fernando, 2020a; Fernando, 2020b). In many countries, pandemic-related regulations – as a tangible form of bio-power (Foucault, 1998) – have drastically impacted social relations and bodily freedom while granting extraordinary rights to governments (Boschele, 2020). In particular, authoritarian and populist regimes, a feature of the 21st century's new political moment (Mouffe, 2018; Scoones et al., 2018; Bello, 2019; Bernstein, 2020; Edelman, 2020), use the COVID-19 pandemic as another opportunity to push back further on democracy (Cupples, 2020; Guasti, 2020). In many places, competing claims and inherent uncertainties regarding the need for major control or, contrarily, a *laissez-faire* approach (vis- à-vis the spread of the virus, persons' mobility, and the dissemination of "fake" news on the pandemic) have contributed to legitimizing authoritarian and populist politics. The pandemic has relegated questions of social-environmental justice (for example, in relation to gender, race, class, geographical location, nationality, caste, and political affiliation) to a secondary level (Pleyers, 2020). It has also exacerbated or intensified processes of extraction and accumulation (Covid-19 Citizen Observatory Nicaragua, 2020; Benites and Bebbington 2020), once again transferring the risks and costs of the crisis to marginalized parts of the population (Acosta, 2020; Mbembe, 2020).

Yet, while the pandemic seems to have barely shifted the overall existing relations of neoliberal, postcolonial, and patriarchal forces, it has shaken them and exposed further cracks. In this article, we argue that these cracks potentially open up new possibilities for emancipation. The historically unique moment brought on by the pandemic, recently termed the "Virocene," indeed constitutes "a critical battleground" that can potentially challenge hegemonic power relations (Fernando, 2020a; Fernando, 2020b; Pleyers, 2020). We understand emancipation as fundamental alterations to political, economic, and socionatural relations, practices, values, and meaning-making (Nightingale, Gonda, and Eriksen 2021), and we focus on the *process* of emancipation rather than its outcomes. Moreover, in our understanding, contributions to emancipation do not always need to materialize in grand and visible actions, especially in authoritarian contexts; we do not imagine them as always leading to the full overcoming of oppression. We hence avoid the "action bias" in engagements with emancipation, recognizing that other, more subtle cognitive processes, motivations, desires, and aspects of our ethical activity can also count (Madhok, 2013). Furthermore, when thinking about emancipatory politics, we understand them as always "in the making" likely to be "(re)configured, subverted, and transformed by individuals" (Sundberg, 2004, 46–47).

Discussions about pandemic politics in authoritarian and populist contexts have addressed topics such as the psychological reasons for people's acceptance of state measures that increase control and contribute to putting democracy on hold in the name of the pandemic (Caduff, 2020; Edwin, 2020; Envio, 2020; Wnuk et al., 2020); the ways in which pandemics have served as an excuse to strengthen border politics by states with a history of strong frontier security policies (Neyrat, 2010; Estévez, 2018; Kenwick and Simmons, 2020); and the authoritarian and undemocratic grip on power in times of COVID-19 (Kellner 2021). Others have highlighted the importance of the science-society-democracy nexus to argue for the dismantling of epistemic injustices (Fernando, 2020b, 650) and the promotion of epistemic plurality regarding the scientific knowledge that is supposed to feed into pandemic policies (Boschele, 2020). Thorough engagements with uncertainty, however, are missing in critiques of pandemic politics (Leach et al., 2020). In our discussion of the "love triangle" among populism, authoritarianism, and pandemic politics, we explicitly embrace the uncertain, unpredictable, and ambiguous character of power processes as they constitute potential openings for emancipation (Butler, 1997).

Recently, extensive discussions about the intimate relationship between authoritarianism and populism have suggested conjoining these two terms as one expression – authoritarian populism – to refer to undemocratic politics that rely discursively on the sovereign rule of "the people" described in homogeneous terms (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Bernstein, 2020 see also **Section 2.2**). The appearance of a third party (the pandemic) has created a crisis and put both authoritarian and populist politics under pressure. Our hypothesis – especially at the beginning of the pandemic when we started writing this article – was that these politics could be transformed given the pressure provided by the pandemic. This article focuses on this transformational potential.

In our analysis we emphasize the relational, cross-scalar boundary-making processes through which COVID-19 politics reinforce and, sometimes simultaneously, challenge authoritarianism and populism. We explain how these processes strengthen exclusionary knowledge claims to (re) produce binaries and produce particular subjectivities affecting specific population groups through, for example, the manipulation of fear and anxiety. Inspired by feminist and decolonial political ecology (e.g., Elmhirst, 2011; Sultana, 2015; Mollett, 2017; González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2019; Mollett et al., 2020) and through a threefold conceptual focus on authority, knowledges, and subjectivities, we ultimately explore conceptual and practical opportunities for emancipation in these

times of interconnected social, political, environmental, and public health crises. As political ecologists coming from different backgrounds, epistemologies, vulnerabilities, and parts of the world that are differently affected by the pandemic, we join our efforts to strengthen calls for de-naturalizing (Mostafanezhad 2020), de-colonizing, and re-politicizing (Leach et al., 2020) responses to the pandemic. The concomitant focus on prospects for emancipation resonates with recent discussions on transformations to sustainability (Stirling 2014; Feola 2015; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling 2015; Patterson et al., 2017; Blythe et al., 2018; Fazey et al., 2018; Scoones et al., 2020; Zografos et al., 2020) and their effort to embrace uncertainties, recognize entangled vulnerabilities, and envision new anti-imperialistic and democratic ways of living life in common.

In the next sections we discuss boundary-making processes in pandemic politics as our main analytical framework (**Section 2**). We then provide a brief reflection on our positionality and the methods we have used (**Section 3**). In **Section 4** and **Section 5**, we illustrate how pandemic politics in the selected contexts of Nicaragua, Hungary, and Guatemala are embedded in and imbued by an authoritarian and populist rule of law and how these might be contested by emancipatory initiatives. In **Section 6** we conclude by offering key elements for a political ecology research agenda.

## 2 PANDEMIC POLITICS, BOUNDARY-MAKING, AND EMANCIPATORY POSSIBILITIES

Intersectional and historical vulnerabilities are central to the burgeoning literature on the COVID-19 pandemic (Amon and Wurth, 2020; Dyer 2020; Leach et al., 2020; Matthewman and Huppatz 2020; Sokol and Pataccini 2020; Gonda et al., 2021; Menton et al., 2021). Yet political ecology analyses of the pandemic that engage more profoundly with possibilities for radical transformations are scarcer. Notable exceptions are Jude L. Fernando's articles in which he prompts political ecologists to radically rethink justice, vulnerability, and connectedness within socionatures (Fernando 2020a, b). Fernando argues that we need to imagine counter-hegemonic ways of engaging with the socionatural vulnerabilities that the pandemic has further revealed. In other words, we need a new moral perspective that opens up the conceptual possibilities for emancipation "without dismissing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives in the name of otherness, difference, universalism or sameness" (Fernando 2020a, 685). Fernando also highlights the role of emancipatory subjectivities (understood as subjectivities shaped by emancipatory ideals) yet warns that highly repressive contexts are not favorable for their emergence: the challenge "is that of assisting those who are threatened by COVID-19 to question their own subjectivities as these have been embodied in oppressive economic and political ideologies" (719). This is important to counter the expectation of only a short-lived crisis and a longing for a "new normal" in which these exclusionary processes and ideologies are not further challenged. Indeed,

> "[those made vulnerable by the arrival of the Virocene] may – understandably – shrink away from challenging dominant ideologies and practices, instead pursuing any number of alternative social paths within them – or, perhaps, simply accept the status quo and search for ways to survive. Moreover, privileged social groups who genuinely aspire to live life in harmony with society and nature, by being unwilling to give up their privilege or their well-intended actions, do not necessarily help transform the systemic injustices faced by the less privileged" (Fernando 2020a, 719).

To engage with the ongoing global conversation on the political dynamics brought about by the spread of the novel coronavirus, without losing sight of emancipation, we use a situated understanding of power processes. Inspired by feminist and decolonial political ecologies (Faria and Mollett, 2020; Zanotti et al., 2020), we pay attention to the ambivalent, complex, and uncertain character of power processes.

### 2.1 Power Processes and Boundary-Making in Political Ecology

A critical and nuanced understanding of power is indeed necessary to delve into the particularities of authoritarian and populist pandemic politics and to explore the conceptual possibilities for emancipation. We use the lens of boundary-making processes as our hermeneutical device to engage with this challenge.

Broadly speaking, there has been a tendency in political ecology to frame power in dual ways (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018). The "people" at the micro-level often get analyzed through empirical studies (e.g., Hill and Byrne, 2016; Aguilar-Støen, 2018), and power has been frequently discussed as a relational (in)capacity to act or as a vulnerability conceptualized as something negative and relatively fixed (Fernando 2020b). In parallel, the power of entities such as the state has often been understood through the resources (both material and symbolic) they hold and the knowledge they have monopoly on (Scott 1998; Robbins 2008). This understanding tends to render the notion of the state as a stable entity and risks constructing "the people" as helpless and agentless (hooks, 1990; Long 2001), as if power processes had a "structural determination" (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018, 384).

More recently, some feminist and decolonial perspectives have complexified perspectives on power. Feminist political ecologists, for example, have argued that power processes can be simultaneously situated and interconnected, as well as cross-scalar, aleatory, and ever-changing (e.g., Elmhirst 2011; Nightingale 2011; Sultana 2011; Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Nygren 2015; Gonda 2019b; Nightingale 2019). These processes are a "relational, productive force that generates contradictory effects within the same actions" (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018, 382). This understanding of power processes draws attention to the contradictory and ambiguous effects of power (Butler 1997), thereby signaling that "governance processes can both empower and create new relations of domination at the same

time" (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018, 382). Thus, dominance and emancipation are not always in stark opposition. They are closely intertwined in a constant dispute over power balances whose outcomes are contingent upon an ample range of agencies (Butler 1997). An emancipatory initiative "may be vulnerable to co-option by the very forces it seeks to transform" (Fernando 2020b, 638). Importantly, no oppression is absolute and there are always possibilities for emancipation.

In her ground-breaking effort to move beyond sticky discussions of power as "being held," Andrea Nightingale has argued for more focus on *where* power processes occur and how these locations create boundaries. Such a focus helps us better understand how political authority works, i.e., "who is authorized to govern change, who is required to make changes on the ground, and what subjectivities and pathways emerge" (Nightingale 2018, 689). She recommends closer scrutiny of the making of three analytical boundaries, namely: 1) the state-society boundary, as in private versus public use and ownership, 2) the society-nature boundary, as in the arbitrary division between human-made nature and wilderness, and 3) the citizenship-belonging boundary, as seen in the "rights-holder citizen" versus "illegal alien" binary. According to Nightingale, the very boundary-making processes create "relational inclusions and exclusions that encompass the non-human, and shape what emerges as 'resources' and 'subjects' in need of governing" (Nightingale 2018, 689). For us, what is of key importance is how a better understanding of these boundary-making processes can help us to question the authoritarian and populist state as well as its knowledge politics under the pandemic, and how emancipatory subjectivities can emerge.

## 2.2 Authoritarianism, Populism, and Boundary-Making in Pandemic Politics

While we understand populism and authoritarianism as two separate parts of the "love triangle," scholarly discussions on authoritarian populism are useful for exploring boundary-making processes in pandemic politics under authoritarian *and* populist rule, as both typically thrive by binding consent and strategically shifting the state's role. When Stuart Hall, for instance, first coined the term authoritarian populism in 1978 (Hall et al., 2013) – and addressed it in subsequent essays (Hall, 1979; Hall, 1980; Hall, 1985) – his intention was to highlight the importance of the operations designed to bind or construct popular consent behind authoritarian politics. Consent in pandemic politics can be naturalized by delegitimizing any disagreement about the fact that "we" need to unite efforts to stop the virus's spreading. In other cases, consent can be naturalized instead by downplaying the importance of the pandemic. In either case, consent is politicized, and oppositional claims vis-à-vis the status quo are deemed by the authorities as obstructing efforts made in humanity's "common" interest. With pandemic politics, depending on the particulars of each region of the world, there seems to be a dual movement between the individualization of responsibilities (i.e., the strengthening of anti-statism) and the shifting roles attributed to the state, which is increasingly authorizing the use of coercive power while retaining "most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place" (Hall 1979, 15).

An important feature of authoritarian and populist politics of the 21st century is their contradictory and chameleonic nature (Mamonova 2018; Scoones et al., 2018; Bello 2019; Edelman 2019; McCarthy 2019; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019; Hart 2020). This feature often relies on narratives of inclusion, justice, national sovereignty, religious sentiments, and solidarity, which – at the surface – may sound emancipatory and aligned with building consent. It is often the pseudo-emancipatory narrative that provides the opportunity for authoritarian populist discourses to prosper (Lubarda 2018). Hence, a way to understand emancipation under authoritarian and populist rule stems from an analytical engagement with its contradictions (Neimark et al., 2019).

Moreover, as (Scoones et al., 2018, 2) note, "authoritarian populism typically depicts politics as a struggle between 'the people' and some combination of malevolent, racialized and/or unfairly advantaged 'Others,' at home or abroad or both." They argue that "[c]onflating a diverse and democratic people with images of dangerous and threatening crowds – 'a brutal and ignorant mass' (Rancière et al., 2013) – allows for the putting of one ideology and position 'first,' while excluding others and generating tensions across society" (Scoones et al., 2018, 3). Similarly, for Slavoj Žižek, what is at stake is "how to sustain the fiction of the Other" and how to leave "the subject vulnerable to another paranoiac impostor" (Zizek, 1998, 1).

In engaging with boundary-making processes in pandemic politics under authoritarian and populist rule, there is a need to analyze "who is incorporated and to what extent, and who is excluded, and under what conditions" (Scoones et al., 2018, 2, building on; Rancière et al., 2013). Put somewhat differently, we need to understand how (and which type of) exclusions sustain the intersection between pandemic politics, authoritarianism, and populism (what we call the "love triangle"). Gisselle Benites and Bebbington (2020), for example, illustrate how boundary-making processes in Peru have further legitimized extractive mining, which benefited economic and political elites under the pandemic, when most other economic activities in the country, in particular those of people with fragile livelihood strategies, were shut down.

Additionally, a decolonial perspective on boundary-making processes in authoritarian and populist politics allows for holding in creative tension the question of how such processes can rely on and *at the same time* challenge existing hierarchies based on the worst cases of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. For emancipation to be put back on the political agenda, even in times of pandemic, we must not lose sight of this colonial legacy. We need to expand "the archive" (Mbembe 2015) and re-center marginalized knowledges, epistemes, and cultures to be able to think beyond the status quo (Ngugi, 1993).

## 2.3 Authority, Knowledge Politics, and Subjectivities in Pandemic Politics

The making – and remaking – of state-society, society-nature, and citizenship-belonging boundaries through pandemic politics

requires mobilizing consent as well as generating strategic exclusions and inclusions. These processes are based on claims of authority and knowledge, as well as the creation of particular subjectivities. In what follows, we expand on the threefold conceptual focus that we adopt to envisage opportunities for emancipation under authoritarian and populist pandemic politics.

### 2.3.1 Authority

Drawing on key political-ecology scholarship (Valdivia 2008; Sikor and Lund 2009; Nightingale and Ojha 2013; Burke and Shear 2014; Svarstad, Benjaminsen, and Overå 2018), we understand authority as being always in the making "through the process of successfully defining and enforcing rights to community membership and rights of access to important resources" (Lund 2016, 1199), including knowledge. Thus, the workings of pandemic politics in terms of both normative directives and knowledge trustworthiness will reveal the essence of such authority (Lund 2016, 1221). The attempts at governing both society and its changes, and of dealing with pandemic-related questions, will be as much about governing those citizens that the regime constructs as its "people" (Valdivia 2008) as it is about dealing with the virus per se. Rather than understanding authority as a form of power held by the state, we understand it as a set of power relations co-constitutive of the state itself. It is through the exercise of public authority, entangled in a set of human and non-human relationships, that the state emerges as a socio-natural becoming" (Nightingale, 2018). Considering this notion, struggles over authority become foundational to state-society boundaries (Nightingale 2018, 692) as power processes are performative and relational: "... states do not have power, rather, they have the exercise of power; its recognition and legitimization (Sikor and Lund 2009) *produces* 'stateness' and subjects" (Nightingale 2018, 692 italics in original). This understanding of the state as a multisited and contradictory entity, whose (re-)negotiation can have unintended outcomes, is key as it opens up the conceptual possibility for re-imagining public authority (Nightingale 2018).

### 2.3.2 Knowledge

Knowledge politics are deeply embedded in and imbued by authority. Our reliance on a decolonial perspective permits a nonhierarchical and relational reading of power, that is, a reading where the exercise of power at the geopolitical, biopolitical, and micro-political levels of pandemic policies are not unidirectional but instead affect each other and have contingent results (Castro-Gómez 2007; Beltrán-Barrera and Yilson, 2019). The decolonial perspective underscores forms of onto-epistemic subordination – or "cognitive empire" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Sabelo, 2021) – geared at suppressing nonmodern or nonuniversal modes of constructing knowledge as well as of living and being in the world (Grosfoguel 2013; Blaser 2014). This violence is, for instance, manifested in the reduction of the ontological difference to a cultural difference; that is, complex forms of knowledge of, or experiences and relationality with, the world are reduced to a different (and wrong) way of understanding a unique world with a universal reality (Escobar 2014; Kothari et al., 2019; Blaser 2020). Through this production of a hierarchy of subject positions, some subjects are authorized to know the world through so-called objective knowledge while other subjects can only interpret it (but not understand it) from their belief systems (Escobar 2014). Because "[t]he asymmetry of ways of knowing overlaps the asymmetry of powers" (De Sousa Santos, 2009, 116), not having "valid" cognitive authority transforms into lack of political authority to decide (Blaser 2020).

In the context of pandemic politics, techno-scientific and technocratic logics are imposed, reducing or completely foreclosing the possibilities for dialogue between plural public health approaches based on local knowledge and needs. Fernando's discussion of "anti-science trends" shows how "political hostility to scientific knowledge also exacerbates the vulnerability of racially marginalized communities to COVID-19," and the need for a "knowledge justice framework" rather than "better or more accurate scientific knowledge." He writes: "the survival of (neoliberal) regimes thus depends not only on production but also on the suppression of scientific knowledge that is detrimental to the (neoliberal) narrative" (Fernando 2020b, 649). Decolonial knowledges are plural; they help us rethink, embrace, *and* challenge embodied experiences, without establishing an opposition between science and traditional knowledge; they can affect each other and sometimes complement each other, although this process is not always free of tensions (De Sousa Santos 2006; Horowitz 2015).

### 2.3.3 Subjectivities and Emotions

The citizenship-belonging boundary is key to our discussion of authoritarianism and populism as it relates to who (citizenship based on specific intersectional claims) and what (e.g., human bodies' mobility) become targets of state rule. These boundary-making processes create subjects through subjectivation processes, i.e., the ways in which people are brought into relations of power. Subjectivation is always ambiguous (Butler 1997; Mbembe 2001) because it paradoxically also confirms subordinating norms (Butler 1990). Thus, "the exercise of power is ambivalent and produces contradictory outcomes in many instances" (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018, 386). Contested boundaries help (re-)imagine political authority and socio-environmental relations, including subjectivation processes related to pandemic politics.

Decolonial literature importantly points to counter-subjectivation processes by examining, for example, forms of political authority beyond the state (Escobar 2014; Middleton 2015; Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020), such as autonomist territorial initiatives (Zibechi 2006) and the appeal to the principles of sovereignty and self-determination (Middleton 2015). Therefore, by "carefully observing the actions of the condemned, in the process of becoming a political agent" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 162 our translation) as a way to "re-invent social emancipation," struggles are made visible in their own terms and according to their own conditions and experiences (De Sousa Santos 2006).

Finally, feminist political ecology's special attention to the embodied level also brings an important and under-scrutinized topic into the debate: that of the emotional aspects of processes that make people vulnerable (Sultana 2011; Sultana 2015; Singh

2017; González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2019; Graybill 2019). Discussing how emotions and affect are manipulated by pandemic politics and how they can constitute other ways of knowing and experiencing pandemic politics (Anderson and Smith 2001), as well as how they can open up the conceptual possibility for emancipation (Nightingale, Gonda, and Eriksen 2021), is key for envisaging relational processes based on solidarity and care (Gonda et al., 2021). West-centered knowledge has typically favored "logos over pathos" (Boff 2005), thus exacerbating the divide between nature and culture and undervaluing ways of knowing that are relational, experiential, affective, embodied and emotional because they are not based on what is deemed to be scientific knowledge (Kothari et al., 2019).

## 3 METHODS AND POSITIONALITY

This article builds on a collaboration among peers who felt an urge to unite their voices as fellow researchers and world citizens working on similar topics to ask: When, if not now, will we stop and engage with the meanings and consequences of emancipation? In particular, we connect through our concerns for ongoing populist and authoritarian politics in countries that all of us have lived and worked in, namely: Hungary, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The shared analysis and discussion push us to reflect on our own position with respect to the existing power hierarchies in each of our respective (home and host) countries and our role as critical, caring, and engaged citizens and academics. This position may be different for every one of us, but we are united in the desire to engage with solidarity and critical reflection to expose processes of social injustices, especially as this pandemic appears to magnify the skewed distributive processes of broader socio-ecological crises. Even more so since some of the glimpses of hope and solidarity that we have seen at the beginning of the pandemic appear to have been watered down into a political status quo by the time we are finalizing this article.

In very different ways, we have all been confronted with lived contradictions and mixed feelings of fascination, fear, hope, and fatigue since the start of the pandemic. Some of us have lived through very strong confinement measures while others have faced tough choices of voluntary confinement related to an apparent lack of state regulation. Especially for those who were away from home throughout this time of reduced mobility and differentiated experiences, the emotional toll has been heavy. We have also experienced changes in our workplaces. These include bureaucratic impositions and expectations regarding transitions to online learning and research, which have impacted chances for intellectual creativity, as well as the confrontation with labor differentiation when some had the possibility to go into (voluntary) confinement while others could not. Even from our privileged positions in terms of (comfortable) confinement, strong personal networks, and rather stable professional situations, as for so many people, it has been a physically and emotionally trying endeavor to combine care work with our professional activities. At the same time, this period has created a momentum to reflect on what matters most in life, with instances of both optimism and pessimism.

The following analysis is based on a review of official and nonofficial secondary sources, media publications, personal communications, and a review of academic literature. The main search was completed by mid-November 2020. Since then, new articles on the topic are published regularly. As mentioned, the selection of cases grew "organically" through our combined reflection on the contexts we are familiar with.

## 4 CASE STUDY CONTEXTS: HUNGARY, NICARAGUA, AND GUATEMALA

In this paper, our objective is not to enter in discussions about where Hungary, Nicaragua, and Guatemala are situated on the authoritarian and populist scale. Rather, we aim to demonstrate how the boundary-making processes in pandemic politics rely on, and reinforce, authoritarianism and populism. We hope to better understand the practices of pandemic politics in other authoritarian and populist contexts and spur further reflections on productive conceptual possibilities for emancipation that stretch beyond the struggle against populism and authoritarianism.

Authoritarian and populist politics take different forms in our cases. Hungary – where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has won three successive elections since 2010 – is recognized as one of the most authoritarian states of Europe. In the international and opposition media, its politics are qualified as right-wing (McLaughlin 2018), anti-liberal (Tharoor 2017), and anti-democratic (Rovny 2016), and Orbán's regime is often compared to Putin's Russia or Morawiecki's Poland. Among other strategies, the Hungarian regime has excluded political detractors, favored privatizing agricultural land, via processes that would allow national economic and political elites to concentrate a large part of the land and agricultural subsidies granted by the European Union (Gonda, 2019a; Bori and Gonda, 2021). This capitalist accumulation has been accompanied by the dismantling of workers' unions, the neutralization of the political opposition, and the creation of a media empire to control the national political agenda (Scheiring and Szombati, 2020). In this way the regime has managed to limit the emergence of civic and political opposition while appearing to maintain democratic institutions. These institutions, however, favor the ruling party and deploy coercive patronage and a nationalist but exclusionary discourse through social programs for disadvantaged sectors (Scheiring and Szombati, 2020). In Hungary, the pandemic prompted the declaration of a state of emergency as early as March 2020, which has allowed the regime to, for example, modify the Constitution in ways that institutionalize the oppression of LGBTQ people, among other exclusionary measures that were already in process before.

In Nicaragua, the ruling (and former revolutionary) political party, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), has developed strategic alliances and increased repression, which have contributed to the emergence of an autocratic regime. Since its return to power in 2006, the Sandinista regime relies on neoliberal economics while drawing on a post-neoliberal, morally conservative, and religious discourse (Duterme 2018). The early alliance with Hugo Chávez's Venezuela gave President

Daniel Ortega access to discretionary loans and international markets, which facilitated a pact with the private sector and the possibility of financing social programs to maintain his party's social base (Martí Puig, 2019; Cruz and Arturo, 2020). Additionally, his cooperation with conservative sectors of the Catholic Church enabled him to deploy a populist propaganda that mixes strong personalism with notions of socialism and Christianity. This, for example, is reflected in political slogans such as "*Nicaragua Cristiana, Socialista y Solidaria*" (Nicaragua Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity), written on giant banners that show a photo of Ortega and his wife (and currently also vice president), Rosario Murillo, thus instantiating a messianic image of Ortega (Aragón 2018). The regime has progressively installed a new dictatorship by governing according to an undemocratic model of political and economic extractivism (Osorio, Cortez, and Sánchez 2018), dismantling the incipient institutions (Contreras, 2011), ignoring social plurality (De Gori, 2018), and weakening any meaningful political opposition (especially from those calling to respect the base of incipient democracy: freedom and power independence). Consequently, a socio-political crisis broke out in 2018, resulting in continuing and ever-increasing social polarization and political repression (De Gori, 2018). In March 2020, the Nicaraguan government's initial strategy was to dismiss the threat of COVID-19. This included, for instance, medical staff's initial ban on wearing mouth-masks, arguing that this would create unnecessary panic. However, recognizing that a new sanitary crisis on top of the existing economic, political, and environmental ones could be used by opponents in the political struggle, the government promoted public activities for their political supporters as a symbol of strength, thus calling for solidarity with all people of the world suffering from COVID-19, as if Nicaraguans were immune to the virus (Buben and Kouba 2020; Salazar Mather et al., 2020).

Guatemala has been marked by economic, political, and social violence for decades. In part, this is because two thirds of its arable land is concentrated in the agro-industries of sugar cane, palm oil, and rubber (FAO 2018), while 60 percent of the population currently lives below the poverty line – a figure that rises to 78 percent in the northwestern provinces, inhabited mostly by indigenous peoples (INE, 2020). In this context, economic and military elites exercise direct violence against those who are seen as "promoter[s] of social conflict" (Aguilar-Støen and Bull 2016, 35 our translation) because they oppose the extractive agenda of the national development model. The violence and restrictions on human rights have led to descriptions of Guatemala as a hybrid regime that mixes characteristics of liberal democracy with autocratic elements (The Economist, 2020). The current tensions between the traditional and the emerging elites over control of the state (Aguilar-Støen and Bull 2016), and recent corruption and illicit financing scandals, led to the electoral victory of President Alejandro Eduardo Giammattei Falla – a right-wing populist – based on his promise of "working for the people." Giammattei, whose first year in office was 2020, is a trained physician, whose degree in medicine seems to have helped him foresee what was coming with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and likely prompted a swift response as of 13 March 2020, after the country's first infection was officially acknowledged. This sort of medical leadership, however, rapidly diminished due to widespread mistrust among the citizenry vis-à-vis a perceived lack of transparency in how the available emergency funds were being used. Giammattei embodies an authoritarian ruling style, which is deeply seated in an ethos of the Guatemalan oligarchy, whose right-wing activism stretches beyond national borders. His elitist rule, colloquial demeanor, and medical training make him a major player in the love triangle of authoritarianism, populism, and the pandemic.

# 5 AUTHORITARIAN AND POPULIST PRACTICES OF BOUNDARY-MAKING IN PANDEMIC POLITICS

When analyzing the cases of Hungary, Nicaragua, and Guatemala through the making of the state-society, society-nature, and citizenship-belonging boundaries (Nightingale 2018), three main tensions or contradictions come to the fore with respect to control, knowledge politics, and processes of subjectivation. In what follows, we discuss these tensions and identify some of the key challenges to breaking up the unhealthy tripartite love relationship between authoritarianism, populism, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5.1 The State-Society Boundary: The Contradiction of Control

The pandemic has highlighted an important conceptual challenge of emancipation: how control can prospectively appear positive in the face of planetary emergencies, yet retrospectively can often be seen as negative and undemocratic (Stirling 2015). In non-crisis times and in modern democracies, measures such as limiting people's mobility and the imposition of curfews would probably be deemed problematic. During a pandemic, however, these same measure may be perceived as useful and justified (Wnuk, Oleksy, and Maison 2020). Similarly, in other crisis situations, such as the aftermath of terrorist outbreaks or disasters, people are also more willing to accept surveillance and control of their liberties if these measures provide a sense of increased safety (Klein 2007; Asbrock and Fritsche 2013; Wnuk, Oleksy, and Maison 2020; Kaufman 2021). Roccato et al. (2020) documented this tendency, based on survey data collected in the Spring of 2020 in pandemic-affected Italy, underscoring how the pandemic and related socio-economic threats contribute to increasing support for undemocratic political systems.

### 5.1.1 Emergency Discourse and Normalizing the Exceptional

In Hungary, the prescription for control has been reinforced through the framing of the pandemic as an "emergency" and "disaster," which led the way to further securitize the pandemic (Molnár, Takács, and Harnos 2020). More specifically, Prime Minister Orbán's communication on social media has relied on military metaphors to legitimize the measures taken during the state of emergency and to amplify the persuasive effect of his messages on citizens. As early as on 6 March 2020, and as reported by the pro-regime research institute Századvég Foundation, the pandemic ranked third (at 56 percent) among things most feared in the minds of Hungarians after climate

change (87 percent) and illegal migration (63 percent). This study was not aimed at assessing Hungarians' fears; rather, it served to put the pandemic on the regime's propagandist agenda as one of the major "threats" to Hungarians' lives. This is similar to how illegal migration has been conveniently used by the regime, since 2015, to justify its nationalist politics (Scott 2020), and how climate change now also serves anti-migration and eco-fascist advocacy in the United States (see the idea of ecobordering in Turner and Bailey 2021, or the most recent examples in the United States such as Republicans in Arizona now using climate fears for anti-migration purposes in Kaufman 2021). Like his rhetoric on illegal migrants, Orbán's messages regarding the pandemic on his social media platforms

> "[mobilize] the technique of personalization, which involves presenting a threat and offering rescue or shelter from it (...). Fear (. . .) [is] presented as instilled by imminent danger threatening human lives, society and economy. Discourse (. . .)[focuses] on national cohesion and unity of action but in the photos the PM (. . .) [is] visualized as the protagonist of the fight against the COVID-19 virus (Molnár, Takács, and Harnos 2020)".

Using the discourse of emergency to reinforce control has served to perpetuate and deepen specific exclusions – a similar phenomenon has been described in other emergency situations such as after the 2010 earthquake in Chile by Gould, Garcia, and Remes (2016). In Hungary, the state of emergency has, for instance, allowed the regime to institutionalize intolerance against the LGBTQ community by inscribing gender normative principles into the Constitution under the guise of the pandemic. So far, however, critiques of this measure have tended to focus on *how* the state of exception has been used and abused in Hungary rather than questioning its *raison d'être* (see, e.g., Guasti, 2020).

The emergency discourse justified by the pandemic has been steadily acquiring a permanent character with important consequences on the consolidation of the state-society boundary. Originally understood as something extraordinary, emergency policies become "sticky" (Dodds et al., 2020) and get normalized in the "risk society" (Beck, Lash, and Wynne 1992). Thus, under the pandemic, the state-society boundary is constantly remade in such a way that the state appropriates exceptional rights for controlling citizens, bodies, borders, and mobility while certain types of (racialized, gendered) subjects become excluded. In Hungary, this manifests in measures directly related to stopping the spread of the virus, but also to measures that are totally unrelated. The initiatives taken under the guise of the pandemic against academic freedom and refugees help reinforce an authoritarian and populist regime through its racist, intolerant, illiberal and extreme-right underpinnings (see also **Section 5.2.1**).

### 5.1.2 Economic and Political Control by and for the Elites

Control is not necessarily only reinforced from a central vantage point. Historical privileges – in particular those of economic and political elites, who often support authoritarian and populist regimes – are reproduced in multiple ways through pandemic politics. While the coronavirus pandemic seems to be rewriting economic geographies in many countries, there is a clear rush by already powerful economic actors to further consolidate their power. In Hungary, the regime's oligarchs do so by grabbing most public procurement tenders on mask and respiratory device purchases (Hungary Today 2020), while strategic alliances, such as those with China and Russia, are reinforced by becoming buyers for their vaccines. This is a way for the Orbán regime to secure economic and political support within and outside Hungary's borders (Sokol and Pataccini 2020).

In Guatemala, pandemic politics illustrate the further maintenance of colonial legacies and authoritarian modes of rule that perpetuate oppressions related to ethnicity and class (Hurtado-Paz y Paz, 2019; Bergeret 2017; Caballero-Mariscal 2018; López de la Vega, 2019). For example, private hospitals in Guatemala, particularly the wealthiest ones, tend to offer higher-quality services while state-sponsored medical facilities are oftentimes understaffed, undersupplied, and underfunded. In fact, first-line medical staff dealing with the pandemic had not received their salaries as late as several weeks into the pandemic despite the strenuous conditions that they had to endure.

In Nicaragua the regime has also undertaken strategies to secure its political and economic control and that of its elites. These included the Nicaraguan president presenting himself as a victim of a coup and subject to hostile (foreign and internal) forces – both in light of the popular uprising of 2018 and in light of the pandemic. Systematically neglecting the importance of the threat caused by the virus in itself was also a way to avoid the need to economically support those hardest hit by the crisis. For example, at an extraordinary session held at the Nicaraguan National Assembly at the end of March 2020, the president of the economic commission requested that the microphones of any deputy of the opposition party who wanted to talk about the pandemic be turned off (Team Envío 2020). He also disqualified opposition members' proposals to provide economic aid to people working in informal and small businesses who suffered from the pandemic-related economic crisis as "astonishing political opportunism" and "madness" (Team Envío 2020).

### 5.1.3 Controlling International and Local Mobility

Controlling the nations' borders and people's mobility is another strategy to physically and geographically delimit the boundaries of a nation-state and its society through pandemic politics. In the case of Hungary, the underlying script of border politics under the pandemic is the continuation of the country's oppressive refugee politics, with fences at the borders, based on a racialized narrative. While Nicaragua did not officially close its borders, the narrative stated that those who stayed within the frontiers of the country were safe, thereby reinforcing the image of a regime that was in control of the situation despite the absence of any meaningful action.

In general, border politics under the pandemic have the potential to reinforce the distinction between those citizens who ought to be protected by the borders and those who are not. It also shows how "[i]nternational borders are a handy heuristic for decision-making under uncertainty" in

authoritarian and populist politics (Kenwick and Simmons 2020, 7). Michael Kenwick and Beth Simmons note that, in general, states that have invested heavily in border politics before the pandemic tend to "redeploy those investments in fighting the pandemic" (2020, 19). The United States' border politics vis-à-vis Central American migrants show this continuity, while Nicaragua's (lack of a) border control strategy can be attributed to a desire to justify how well its ruling regime controls the pandemic.

Another type of mobility control has also been central to pandemic politics' reinforcing of undemocratic measures. The prohibition of citizen gatherings, for example in Hungary, – including strikes and political rallies – have further limited possibilities for the opposition to voice their demands. In Nicaragua, the regime reclaimed the monopoly of mobilization, for example, by organizing marches in the name of "love in times of COVID" (El 19 Digital, 2020). These marches insinuated that life could and should continue as usual, thereby downplaying the threat of the virus and strengthening the perception that the regime is in control of the situation – i.e., reinstating government authority.

A potentially emancipatory tension, then, lies in how this control is not free of contestation. On the one hand, in its attempt to control the population in increasingly authoritarian ways, the process of boundary-making generates more exclusions than ever. Exclusions become a way of asserting the state's authority and subjugating certain members of society to preserve what is considered the existing order under the "state of exception" (Agamben 2005). On the other hand, while this seems to be accepted to a certain extent under the "state of exception," we argue that this is also where current tensions emerge and can constitute the opening from which emancipation can arise. The cracks in authoritarian and populist politics could widen once the oppressed manage to ally and politicize oppositional claims on pandemic politics, as we show below.

## 5.2 The Society-Nature Boundary: Contradictions in the Pandemic's Knowledge Politics

The main tension that emerges at the society-nature boundary relates to the pandemics' knowledge politics and the use of two apparently opposite but equally exclusive approaches. On the one hand, the technocratic approach focuses on science and certainty to address a biological and bodily issue. This side of pandemic knowledge politics has been underpinned by efforts to reduce uncertainties and expand the field of the knowable, even though it is increasingly accepted that more information does not necessarily reduce uncertainty (van der Steen et al., 2016). On the other hand, we have the approach based on post-truth politics, which includes elements of economic nationalism, anti-institutional rhetoric, social polarization (e.g., between pro- and anti-pandemic measures) (Neimark et al., 2019), and even different levels and forms of denialism (Altinörs 2020).

Using these two approaches, authoritarian and populist regimes leave little room for deliberation on pandemic politics. Rather, these regimes silence dissenting voices while engaging in a race for more and better "scientific" information or singling out these voices as conspiratorial and destabilizing. Consequently, these two types of knowledge politics avoid contemplating other forms of knowledge through the co-production of knowledge and responses to the pandemic (Bremer et al., 2017; Goldman, Turner, and Daly 2018). These other ways of knowing, based on ontological and epistemological pluralism, include emotions, affective relations, and experiential knowledge (Anderson and Smith 2001) or invoke the need to embrace post-normal science (Ravetz 2020). The latter focuses on safety and (shared) responsibilities rather than on the probabilities of risk. It, hence, embraces the ethical, social, and political aspects of safety (Ravetz 2020) and opens up the possibility to envision processes of emancipation rather than ways to return to "normality."

### 5.2.1 Struggles Over Data Management and Knowledge Claims

In Nicaragua, the knowledge politics behind data management on infection and death rates have been marked by authoritarian and secretive practices. This includes a systematic downplaying and denial of cases and deaths in official statistics and opaque reporting. Official statistics in Nicaragua, for example, report an increase in lung diseases rather than attributing hospitalizations or deaths to COVID-19 (Nicaraguan Sciences Academy, 2020). The official information on COVID-19 is centralized, incomplete, and confusing. For instance, the official statistics presented via a press release in the second week of November 2020 (Nicaraguan Ministry of Citizen Power, 2020) attributed one death to COVID-19 that week; but they did not report on the deaths of people who were officially in intensive care for pulmonary thromboembolism, diabetes mellitus, acute myocardial infarcts, hypertensive crises, and bacterial pneumonia that could have been COVID-19 related. This incomplete and confused weekly reporting has consistently been the practice of health authorities in Nicaragua. In addition, the official media also played a role in downplaying the threat. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, one official journalist described the virus as "the Ebola of white and rich people" (100% Noticias, 2020a) thereby downplaying the virus's impact on the majority of the population.

Importantly for emancipation, though, this secretive and strategic handling of COVID-19 data has prompted initiatives based on counter-knowledge claims such as those of the Covid-19 Citizen Observatory Nicaragua (2020a) (see www.observatorioni.org). The Citizen Observatory is a collaborative and participatory effort by an interdisciplinary team that collects data from organizations, networks, and citizens with the objective of filling information gaps on COVID-19 in the country, resulting in thirty-five press releases as of November 2020. They built on assembled information from citizens and medical personnel in the country's main cities. By 18 November 2020, the Citizen Observatory had reported 2,796 deaths, 5 percent of them from pneumonia and 95 percent suspected to be related to COVID-19. In contrast, the governmental report one day earlier had stated less than 200 deaths from COVID-19 (Nicaraguan Ministry of Citizen Power, 2020).

In addition to this participatory data management, citizens have been circulating videos and photos on social media about

people collapsing in the streets or about secretive nighttime burials. This kind of circulation of information is similar to what happened during the most intensive period of the recent political crisis (April–May 2018), when people used cellphones to expose the massive mobilization that was taking place on streets and the assassination of protesters by regime-supported snipers.

Authoritarian and populist regimes typically deploy efforts to silence these counter-knowledge claims. The Nicaraguan regime, for instance, has been discrediting medical organizations that have called for lockdowns. The regime also encouraged public hospitals to fire doctors who question their authority (Munguía 2020), including Nicaraguan doctors who stated that health authorities had forced them to change the reported diagnosis of COVID-19 to other illnesses (López 2020). Under the pandemic, police violence against journalists and the media that started after the 2018 insurrection has continued. For instance, in the midst of the pandemic (on 27 October 2020), a law against "cybercrime" was approved by the Nicaraguan National Assembly (2020b). Journalists and civil society organizations have interpreted this law as a means to criminalize the production and dissemination of alternative, non-official data. On 28 May 2020 Sergio León, a journalist for Radio La Costeñísima was judicially summoned for a "defamation and insult" lawsuit for "unfaithfully" reporting on the COVID-19 situation through an interview with a public official (PEN International 2020); and on 14 July 2020, a female lawyer was declared guilty of defamation after having shared six audio recordings stating that a political supporter of the ruling party died of coronavirus in the northern city of Somoto (Barrantes 2020).

Under pandemic politics, efforts to silence dissident voices have been implemented in Hungary too: Act XII of 2020 about the Containment of the Coronavirus (also called the Coronavirus Law), made the deliberate distribution of misleading information that obstructs responses to the pandemic punishable by up to 5 years in prison. The use of "knowledge" on how the pandemic started, and what solutions to the pandemic ought to be, is also clearly a battlefield in Hungary (see more in **Section 5.3.1**). The Nicaraguan Citizen Observatory on COVID-19 may also be pressured for its activities through similar legal strategies as the ones in Hungary. Nevertheless, in response to the Nicaraguan regime's attempts to silence the Citizen Observatory, the latter uses strategies based on maintaining anonymity and shared and collective responsibility. In that sense, the Observatory does not only provide hope in terms of emancipatory power, but also is an example of how to survive in oppressive conditions.

### 5.2.2 Pandemic Knowledge Politics and the Coloniality of Knowledge

On 6 June 2020, a Maya K'ekchi' spiritual leader and herbalist, Domingo Choc, was burned to death in the northern province of Petén, Guatemala, by a mob accusing him of witchcraft. Soon after, social media in the country was flooded with racist messages implicitly supporting the assassination (Monzón 2020), and investigators found that religious fundamentalism was a prime motivator for the crime. Shallow explanations for this atrocity soon appeared, blaming ignorance and rural poverty for what happened to Mr. Choc. Fernando Barillas (2020) shed a different light on this case by framing these acts of violence as stemming from an anachronically obtuse rationale deeply connected with other exclusionary processes within pandemic knowledge politics. Mr. Choc's knowledge and practices were deemed threatening to a particularly self-righteous notion of spirituality, despite international recognition of the scientific and social relevance of his work (Monzón 2020). This assassination, and the controversies that followed it, show how deeply rooted some processes of boundary-making are, and how they crystallize under the pandemic reinforcing the divide between "valid" knowledge and any wisdom stemming from subaltern actors whose audacity to persevere is dealt with in this case by setting them on fire in a context characterized in recent years by an average of 130 lynching events per year (Corvino, 2021).

Pandemic knowledge politics in both Guatemala and Nicaragua reinforce the historical undervaluation of proposals coming from indigenous people and subaltern sectors of civil society. This closes down opportunities to develop potentially emancipatory social experiences (De Sousa Santos, 2009), multicultural innovations, and multi-epistemic collaborations (Escobar 2014) through new networks of care, solidarity, and various non-hegemonic approaches to pandemic knowledge politics. It may also have negative implications for indigenous peoples: it risks undermining their capacity to adapt autonomously to the threat of the virus, hampering the creation of conditions for these populations to transform, adapt, and innovate knowledge and norms from within their own unique worldviews and not only according to "the experts" prescription (Escobar 2014). These innovations may include territorial approaches to health management that respect indigenous worldviews and ontologies and community forms of care. These territorial approaches to health management take into account the "biocultural" security demands of the members of the territories in terms of mixed health models that consider both their own worldviews and the supply of "modern" health services. (Borde and Torres-Tovar 2017). These initiatives also incorporate attention to exacerbated violations of indigenous rights in the context of the pandemic, such as territorial invasions and food insecurity (Acosta 2020). In both Nicaragua and Guatemala, increased threats to indigenous rights will be critical elements due to the impact of recent hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020, which destroyed entire communities (many of them with large indigenous populations), forests, and infrastructures – another disaster that intersects with the political, economic and public health crises.

## 5.3 The Citizenship-Belonging Boundary: Creation of Subjects and Manipulation of Emotions

### 5.3.1 Gendered, Racialized, and Politicized Processes of Othering

Through pandemic politics, citizens are governed in multiple ways that go beyond merely regulating public behavior through mobility constraints or the prohibition of certain activities. In Hungary, another important process of subject-creation, which helps to secure the regime's authority, relies on constructing strategic boundaries between those citizens that are "worthy" of protection and those that are not. This is in continuity with Prime

Minister Orbán's broader authoritarian political project and the ways in which "enemies of the Hungarian people" are strategically constructed. For example, the first case of COVID-19 in Hungary was, according to official sources and the mainstream media, "imported" by an "Iranian" person (Amon and Wurth, 2020). The Iranian person was described in governmental media in such a way that readers would imagine a violent Muslim man with a big black beard (in Hungary the public discourse has been racist and anti-refugee, especially against Muslims). In fact, it was a young woman in her twenties of Iranian origin but of Swedish nationality who was studying medicine in Hungary (HVG 2020). The young woman was expelled from Hungary, along with fellow Iranian students who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, based on a claim that they failed to cooperate with the health authorities. While the legal persecution of the Iranian students was later dropped, their case helped the regime to stoke xenophobia by establishing a discursive link between illegal migration and the pandemic as early as March 2020 (Amon and Wurth, 2020), even if the "Iranian persons" in questions had no link whatsoever to illegal migration.

The ways in which the creation of intersectional exclusions in pandemic politics helps consolidate an authoritarian and populist grip on power is also illustrated by how the state of emergency allowed for the introduction of the concept of gender at birth into the Hungarian Constitution, thereby ending legal recognition of trans people as well as their possibilities for sex change (Walker 2020). The only link between these anti-LGBTQ measures and the pandemic is that it would have been difficult to gain approval for them in ordinary times as members of oppositional political parties in the Parliament would probably not voted for these measures. Under the state of emergency, however, their votes were not needed. While the racist discourse has not prompted any major oppositional echo in Hungarian society, the anti-LGBTQ measures have led to the emergence of a widespread campaign on social media with the slogan "A Family Is a Family" ("*A Család az Család*"), which has somewhat united civil society members against the regime's exclusionary narrative and measures.

In Nicaragua, political subjectivation and othering are reinforced by pandemic politics in a context of high political polarization. Those who criticize and demand measures to control the pandemic are perceived by the regime as "*golpistas*" (coup plotters) and portrayed as terrorists and destabilizers who threaten the economic recuperation, the tranquility, and the emotional well-being of "the people" through the generation of panic and the dissemination of fake news. Indeed, the "*Libro Blanco*" ("White Book") on the pandemic (Nicaraguan Government 2020) states that the pandemic is aligned with the popular uprising of early 2018 through informational terrorism that relies on fake news:

> "Nicaragua is an example of unfounded attacks regarding what is happening with the pandemic. [L]ie after lie, media such as Telenica, Repretel and La Nación whose owners represent the Costa Rican Oligarchy, are blatantly lying against their sister nation of Nicaragua... The Nicaraguan coup plotters and their sponsors from the United States, on a daily basis, lie to the people in order to undermine trust in the government (Nicaraguan Government 2020, 44–45 our translation)."

In Guatemala, the pandemic has exacerbated preexisting processes of ethnic othering. An illustration hereof is the previously described case of the assassination of Mr. Choc (Amigo Santiago, 2020). Despite the shared ethnicity of Mr. Choc and his executioners (both Maya K'ekchi'), an argument of racism has been put forward on the grounds of the perceived contempt shown by the attackers toward the ancestral subjectivity embodied in their victim (Amigo Santiago, 2020). In that sense, the murder of Mr. Choc has been associated with the negative otherness he embodied (Figueroa Ibarra 2013), that is, the sort of second-class citizenry whose community-based organization and non-Westernized world vision were portrayed as evidence for backwardness and their political stance as a threat to the modern nation. The pandemic has, in this sense, become a new disciplining grid triggering both a shift toward an authoritarian regime and a widespread sense of impunity among those who strategically reproduce repressions and contribute to silencing particular voices in order to reproduce the status quo.

### 5.3.2 Emergence of Emancipatory Subjectivities

In reaction to these boundary-making processes, several emancipatory subjectivities have emerged, seeking to engage on their own terms with the public health crisis and its intersections with other crises. This is the case for the previously described Citizen Observatory in Nicaragua, but also for the territorial self-quarantines of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities along the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua appealing to the principles of autonomy and self-determination (100% Noticias 2020b). In this regard, members of the Afro-Indigenous Rama-Kriol Territorial Government have demanded that state institutions and tourists avoid visiting their territory. Contrary to the official discourse and practice of the central government, they have asked that mass events be canceled and requested regional and national authorities to provide real and updated information. In Karawala (Nicaragua), an Ulwa-Mayangna fisher-agricultural indigenous community has self-quarantined and called for solidarity under the slogan "if the virus does not kill us, starvation will".

The Nicaraguan government's response to these counter-movements of voluntary confinement has been the militarization of the community in order to control, manage, and monopolize any kind of donation and support to the community (**Figure 1**).

Still, we argue that these counter-initiatives and the emancipatory subjectivities that have emerged in the face of crises and in response to repression require further scrutiny: they bear the potential to pave the way for bigger and more radical changes. The question is how to strategically build on these processes and how to connect them in such a way that they become potentially transformative. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind how seemingly emancipatory subjectivities that emerge through "the will of not to be governed


**FIGURE 1 |** Call for a solidarity collection of medical supplies and food for the Karawala community, organized by the Community and local radio La Costeñísima. Source: 100% Noticias (2020c).

thusly, like that, by these people, at this price" (Foucault 2007, 75) can also reinforce the status quo (Death 2016). It is therefore key to give sustained attention to whose voice counts in the making of the "new normal" and the related encounter of different perspectives. For instance, as COVID-19 cases increased in Guatemala, wealthier brackets of society expressed soon enough their refusal to be locked down and deprived of their right to move around freely. Informal workers, on the other hand, were forced to jeopardize their health by leaving their homesteads in search of daily sustenance (Ola 2020). The former complained about the restrictions hindering their leisure – and their chances for exchange value creation – while the latter found themselves cornered by a powerful virus and the dire need to make a living. The new normal has become, in essence, the embodiment of an emotional boundary-making process but also the ignition device for those hitherto subaltern subjectivities in their renewed struggles for recognition in current power dynamics.

### 5.3.3 Manipulation of Emotions

Emotional boundary-making process are also central in pandemic politics and reinforce authoritarian and populist rule. In Hungary, the official (relatively low) numbers regarding COVID-19 during the Spring of 2020 conveniently fitted the regime's overall discourse, which suggested that Hungarians die much less often of COVID-19 as compared to surrounding countries, thereby glorifying the regime's exceptional capacity to deal with the pandemic. Additionally, there has been a particularly harmful and shocking process of blaming infected people and compelling them to "come out" to be judged by the public purview. Infected, people are obliged to quarantine (under regular police surveillance) and to put an


**FIGURE 2 |** Sticker placed on building doors in Hungary. The red sticker states that it is prohibited to enter, as a person under the surveillance of epidemiologic authorities is living on that property. It further stipulates that the person is not allowed to leave the flat. Source: koronavirus.gob.hu.

official red and yellow sticker, respectively, at their collective (in case of apartment buildings) or individual entranceways (**Figures 2**, **3**). These stickers ominously echo the WWII practice of putting yellow stars on buildings to signal that Jewish people lived there (most of whom were eventually deported and killed in concentration camps). The emotional baggage from these colored stickers is carried by and still painful for part of the Hungarian society. The stickers remind of the Orbán regime's recurrent anti-Semitic stances. The manipulation of negative emotions and embodied memories of WWII contributes to the creation of compliant, depressed subjects who will not rise up against authority.


**FIGURE 3 |** Sticker placed on apartment doors in Hungary. The yellow sticker warns of the presence of a person in the building under surveillance by epidemiologic authorities. Source: ripost.hu.

## 6 CONCLUSION: A PROPOSAL FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT WITH THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF PANDEMICS

Our discussion of the cases above highlighted some of the contradictions that underly pandemic politics in authoritarian and populist settings. The contradictions and complex interactions between different stances related to control, knowledge politics, and subjectivation processes are important to understand because they highlight some of the cracks through which we can and must think about emancipation.

Control, for instance, is prescribed by authoritarian and populist politics for certain type of subjects and in certain contexts, and that control should come from the state. Indigenous communities' initiatives of self-quarantine are therefore discredited and even countered by the authoritarian ruler. It is also important to unveil the continuity of prescriptions for control: in some contexts, pandemic politics consolidate previous exclusionary measures toward refugees via the control of borders; in other contexts, they reinforce already existing obstacles to indigenous populations' participation in decision-making. In this sense, pandemic politics become another instrument of boundary-making between state and society, in addition to being a purported means for halting the spread of the virus.

Pandemic knowledge politics, in particular, are paved with contradictions. The way uncertainty is engaged with not only privileges expert interventions and scientific knowledge claims over alternative and local knowledges, it also downplays the importance of the embodied, affective, and emotional ways of "knowing" the pandemic. This downplaying is materialized in ways that ignore how getting sick from SARS-CoV-2 is a potentially traumatic embodied and emotional experience with uncertain and unpredictable outcomes. By ignoring that, pandemic politics have been calling for masculinist responses that are hand in glove with authoritarian leaders.

Not every form of anti-institutional knowledge is, however, emancipatory in itself, as evidenced by sprawling denials and post-truth strategies. Strategies that bank on relativism are particularly dangerous because they exacerbate the vulnerability of excluded groups, especially when these strategies are coated in the discourses and rhetoric of economic nationalism, social polarization, and anti-migration. The civic initiatives put in place to build and foster solidarity, information, and care are delegitimized by authoritarian and populist regimes because they represent a threat, no matter how local or small they are. From a central vantage point, they are hardly disciplinable forms of authority. By embracing uncertainty rather than silencing it, and by highlighting the relevance of emotional commitments to collective action, different relational, affective, and potentially democratic ways of knowing and dealing with the pandemic can emerge.

The third contradiction we have highlighted – with the aim of identifying the cracks in authoritarian and populist ways of dealing with the pandemic – is related to subjectivation processes. We have discussed some of the ways in which racialized, ethnicized, politicized, and gendered subjects are created through exclusionary pandemic discourses and measures with the aim of creating the compliant and sometimes depressed subjects of authoritarian and populist politics. Understanding and countering these processes and engaging in affective and emotional relations on the basis of our interconnected vulnerabilities is a pathway, we argue, for emancipation. The biggest contradiction has been how the pandemic (the third party in the love triangle) has served to consolidate authoritarian politics and populist politics' love relationship, rather than breaking it up.

In summary, endeavoring to gain a better understanding of boundary-making processes under pandemic politics, and the ways in which these processes create and reinforce specific exclusions to strengthen authoritarian and populist rule, is both timely and important. Because of its long-standing and diverse engagement with the making of vulnerabilities and the workings of power (in relation to authority, knowledge, and subjectivities), a political ecology approach is particularly pertinent to uncovering the contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities within these boundary-making processes and helps open up the conceptual and practical possibilities for emancipation. Hence – building on this article's endeavor to break up the unhealthy love relation among pandemic, authoritarianism, and populism – we call for political ecologists to pay increased attention to: 1) the needed dialogue between political ecology and political ontology, 2) the importance of emotions and affective relations; 3) the centrality of the politics of place, and, 4) the need to expose and denounce the chameleonic and hypocritical nature of authoritarian an populist pandemic politics.

First, in the Virocene epoch that we find ourselves in Fernando (2020a); Fernandob (2020b), in which the drastic and accelerated destruction of socionatures causes new zoonotic threats, the dialogue between political ecology and political ontology, and the contributions of indigenous and Afro-descendant movements that demand a radical difference, promises to be particularly fruitful. This dialogue could aim at thinking together about how to challenge the previously-discussed boundaries and rethink human-nature relationships through caring and community-making (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020; Ybarra 2018, 2013); for instance, by analyzing and documenting territorial approaches for the development of health protocols (Borde and Torres-Tovar 2017). Paying attention and making such alternative worldviews and practices that help rethinking entanglements between humans and non-human beings visible "contributes to actively defending these worlds in their own terms" (Escobar 2014, 109 our translation) and can help us to imagine and enact eco-political communities with different relationships of authority and different proposals related to belonging based on reciprocity rather than hierarchy (TallBear 2011; Whyte 2017; Escobar 2018).

Second, our discussion aimed to highlight some of the aleatory, affective, and emotional aspects of processes that spawn vulnerabilities, such as those related to the pandemic but also to authoritarianism and populism. We suggest that political ecologists should give more sustained importance to emotions, affect, and experiential knowledge, as they can be manipulated and can become counterpoints to exclusionary pandemic politics. Emotions and affective relations have an epistemic potential for emancipation: they are key to envisioning relational processes based on solidarity and care

(Anderson and Smith 2001; Singh 2013). Emotions and affect can offer a counter-narrative vis-à-vis West-centered knowledge, which has typically privileged reason over emotions (Boff 2005), thus exacerbating the divide between nature and culture and undervaluing alternative ways of knowing whose methods and rationales go beyond conventional scientific practice.

Third, we argue for privileging the politics of place, with special attention to the micropolitics of subjectivation (Nightingale 2019). We need to understand better how local alternative grassroots groups come into being and how they denaturalize existing categories (such as "vulnerables" and "beneficiaries") and thereby re-imagine possibilities for social emancipation (De Sousa Santos 2006). In addition, subjectivation processes need to be understood in their historical continuities with long-standing repressive and othering politics.

Furthermore, all of this may sound like a case for "non-authoritarian" and "non-populist" models under the banner of social democracies. We want to stress, however, that we do not want to idealize the "Western" status quo as the model to strive for, and we recognize the inherent exploitation at other scales, in line with older core-periphery conceptualizations of uneven exchange. For us, it is key to show that these authoritarian and populist politics are precisely the consequence of (historically-rooted) models of uneven development, based on the creation of "otherness." While this may be beyond the scope of our paper, we want to make it clear how "a struggle for emancipation," without having those links continuously in mind, risks legitimizing the uneven status quo: is it possible to fight for a non-authoritarian reality in any of the countries we focus on without risking a fall back into the other status quo (as "democratic" as its bubble may be), which remains a model based of uneven exploitation elsewhere (in order to keep that bubble alive)?

Finally, the chameleonic and even hypocritical features of authoritarian and populist politics, including in relation to the pandemic, should never be underestimated: they need to be exposed and denounced. These features are exceptionally visible in their apparent reliance on scientific knowledge and expert advice, both presented in the narrative as objective. While the pandemic has repercussions on the most intimate, affective, and embodied spheres of our lives, the proposed responses are largely presented in a detached way. Their rationale focuses on halting the virus from spreading rather than questioning the pandemic's relations with the features of our modern society such as unsustainability, patriarchy, racism, and environmental degradation (Wallace 2020). At most, pandemic politics look for some kind of transition that provides, at the same time, continuity with the historical exclusions on which authoritarian and populist rule prosper. These politics do not seek transformation in the face of the crisis. They rather approach the crisis as something manageable and in need of orderly control by disciplining citizens through the use of particular forms of knowledge and technological innovation (Stirling 2015, 54). However, no crisis – be it health, political, environmental, or social – justifies securitization, oppressions and putting democracy on hold. Emancipations need to involve diverse political alignments, a plurality of social innovations, "challenging incumbent structures, subject to incommensurable knowledges and pursuing contending (even unknown) ends" (Stirling 2015, 54). In the Virocene epoch, this is more urgent than ever.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conception and design: Original conception and design of project and idea for this paper: NG - Input for discussing conception and ideas: NG, JPPC, FH, GH. Data collection and analysis: Hungary case study: NG - Nicaragua case study: JPPC. Writing of paper: First drafting of paper: NG - Collecting literature for lit review: FH - Writing up literature review: NG - Inputs in methodology: NG, JPPC, FH, GH - Writing up methodology: FH - Substantial input in literature review, framework and analysis: NG, JPPC, FH Discussions on drafts: NG, JPPC, FH, GH Writing up conclusion and agenda for PE: NG, JPPC, FH Editing final draft: NG, GH.

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