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Untimely Ends and the Pandemic Imaginary

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By Christos Lynteris

It was one of those typical late spring afternoons in Beijing, when the desert sand blowing from the North begins to give way to an electric atmosphere more pregnant with thunder than rain. Seated on a covered leather-armchair, I tried to concentrate my attention away from the rasp of the polyethene sheet under me and repeat the question: So what was it, in the end, that put a stop to the spread of SARS five years ago? The epidemiologist seated opposite me held one of those lucrative double posts one often comes across in China as in the US; professor at a medical faculty and officer in a key disease control apparatus of the republic. We do not really know, he replied, why it went or where it's gone. But what will you do if SARS returns one day? I retorted. In a tone perched between a lament and a scoff, the epidemiologist replied: *Exactly what we did last time.*

This short ethnographic vignette encapsulates what in epidemiological literature has come to be spoken of again and again as “the lesson of SARS”. Following the end of the 2003 coronavirus epidemic, the WHO, the US CDC and the newly founded China CDC hailed the success of the measures against the outbreak. Yet, at the same time, they tacitly acknowledged that whilst there was evidence to support that the former halted the pathogen's rapid spread across the globe, no demonstrable relation could be established between this and the sudden disappearance of the pathogen amongst human populations.

In other words, whereas anti-SARS measures, consisting largely in the deployment of quarantine and isolation (technologies developed in and little changed since early modernity), were seen as effective in protecting specific locations from the disease, the end of the pandemic in itself could not be shown to be related to these, but appeared instead to be “spontaneous” or at least generated by unseen factors, independent of human intervention.

This narrative makes SARS the latest example of an epidemiological, epistemological and at the same biopolitical pattern that can be best described as *the problem of untimely ends*. The phenomenon, I would like to argue, refers to such instances when an ongoing, devastating, and to all

appearances unstoppable epidemic suddenly comes to an end. More, however, than simply pointing at the unanticipated secession of an epidemic, the notion relates to the principal effects of the suddenness of this end: the disallowance both of a clear cause-effect attribution of epidemic secession, and of an epistemological closure regarding the disease's status as an existential risk for humanity.

We thus need to place the empirical problem of an untimely epidemic termination (and, more generally, of epidemic termination as such, in terms of what defines or ascertains the end of an outbreak) within the wider context of an altogether different kind of "end". For in the imagination of the "next pandemic", the end of outbreaks like SARS comprises the (always already dramatised) closing scene of a really-existing epidemic. Yet, at the same time, it is an event that defers the coming of the *final end* – the end of humanity both as a biological species and as an ontological condition, i.e. (following Walter Benjamin) as a project of human mastery over human relations with the non-human.

Imaginary Ends

[As has been discussed by Elana Gomel](#) and [more recently by Carlo Caduff](#), in the discursive and performative context of biosecurity, the "next pandemic" is not an apocalyptic or eschatological event. For whereas the apocalypse (in its many religious or secular forms) entails a temporality punctuated by the mutual, anti-dialectical immanence of an absolute end and an absolute (that is to say, counter-temporal) beginning, the "next pandemic" is instead underscored by what Gomel (2000: 409-10) has described as "an accumulation of repetitive episodes, deferring any kind of meaningful closure".

If humanity's apocalyptic being-in-the-world is always already a *being for an eschaton*, by contrast, human existence in expectation of the "next pandemic" unfolds in accordance to "a cyclical plot" (Gomel 2000: 413) of meaningless endlessness, which strips human annihilation of any redemptive quality, whilst abandoning being-human to the realm of a monotonous repetition of extinction deferrals.

What I want to propose here is an examination of the relation between *epidemic ends* and the *pandemic End* in terms of what I would like to coin as the "pandemic imaginary". This does not refer to an imaginary pandemic, to the impact of really existing epidemics on civic or political imagination, or to historical ideas about pathogenic traits of the imagination. Nor however should the proposed notion of the pandemic imaginary be read within the enduring *analytical indistinction* between the imagined and the imaginary, or the imaginary and imagination (prevalent to anthropology and STS). Instead, the term here is intended to relate to

the imaginary in an anthropological-materialist sense, in dialogue with the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.

The Dialectic Imaginary

In his [Imaginary Institution of Society](#), Castoriadis famously distanced himself from psychoanalytic notions of the imaginary. Castoriadis proposed instead an analytic which saw the imaginary not as a reflective surface but as a productive principle of reality. This rejection of Lacanian metaphysics led to an understanding of the imaginary as something that, while on the one hand needs to “pass through the symbolic in order to be expressed” (Moore 2007: 60), on the other hand is not subsumed into it, but exceeds it, insofar as the symbolic “cannot [...] without the capacity to ‘see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is’”.

This understanding of the imaginary is central to Castoriadis’ opposition to an ontology of determinacy – which, in simple terms, postulates that “to be is to be determined” (Gaonkar 2002: 6). In this sense, his notion of the imaginary seems to share with Jean Paul Sartre’s take on the imagination the crucial aspect that, as a capacity for seeing and acting on the world “as different from what [is]” (Gammeltoft 2014: 157), it forms not simply a “power of consciousness” but rather is “the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom” (Sartre 2001 [1940]: 216). However, by crucial difference to Sartre, Castoriadis’s approach conceptualised the imaginary both as what allows for the inter-institution of social and individual autonomy and as what lies at the heart of individual and social heteronomy. Indeed, as what allows the transformation of one form of political being into the other.

What I want to argue here, as a result, is that the pandemic imaginary plays an irrevocably dialectical role. On the one hand it enables us to think or conceptualise a future where human mastery over human/non-human relations has ceased to be humanity’s condition or destiny. It is, in other words, an imaginary that is *institutive* of post-human futures and, at the same time, of a present awakening insofar as, to use Adorno’s [well-known phrase](#), “the absurd is presented as self-evident in order to strip the self-evident of its power”. Yet at the same time, the pandemic imaginary is also a set of *instituted* ideas insofar as it forms part of the state and capital sanctioned apparatus of preparedness, studied to great detail by [Andrew Lakoff](#) and [Frédéric Keck](#). As such, it has an ideological function: that of disallowing the conceptualization of this post-human future in terms of a radically new potentiality; in other words, in terms of (at one and the same time) an alternate anthropogenesis and a new reality principle.

What renders the next pandemic a “preparable” catastrophe is precisely

the fact that it is projected as something which is not (at) all-new. From preparedness exercises to pandemic movies and novels, the social impact of the “next pandemic” is depicted as a meltdown of private property and law-and-order. We can then say that the instituted or *organic* pandemic imaginary, identifying human suffering with the demise of bourgeois values, paints a dystopian picture where humanity is led “back” to an animalistic state of mutual predation. For this regime there can only be two imaginable futures for humanity: the capitalist present or a return to “the stone age”.

Hence whilst pandemic-borne human extinction forms an imaginary that holds the potential of indeterminacy, allowing us to see the human condition as other than is (a future without human mastery), it, at the same time, generates a vision of no imaginable alternative, the future *either as what already is* or *as nothing*. A vision of humanity having finally arrived at its proper plane of existence, which can either be maintained or lost, but in no way overcome – an anthropogenic telos; humanity as Being-in-itself.

What is then the role of “untimely ends” in the imaginary of human extinction?

The Work of the Untimely

It is important to consider that, in what following [Priscilla Wald](#) we may call Western outbreak narratives, epidemics operate on two interlinked temporal registers; first, a linear temporality structured around the beginning and end of an outbreak; second, a circular temporality structured around ideas such as dissipation, dormancy, recrudescence, and epidemic waves. Whereas the first temporal register emerged within historical narratives related to specific epidemic events, such as [Thucydides's plague of Athens](#), the second register has been the historical product of medical narratives, which primarily related epidemics with seasonal phenomena, as exemplified in the Hippocratic corpus.

Adapting these temporal frameworks and entangling them in various, often aporetic ways, over the past century the notion of infection initially unfolded in accordance to a compartmentalisation between, on the one hand, a cyclical temporality of epidemics, as a time proper to the non-human animal realm, and, on the other hand, a linear temporality, which by contrast applies to the impact of a disease in the human realm. In other words, animals and insects were conceived as “natural” reservoirs of infectious diseases; the proper realm of pathogens where they are reproduced through enzootic and epizootic cyclical chains of infection. By contrast, humans were seen as separate from this natural cycle of disease, and infected in a “linear” way. This was a schema that fostered ideas and affects crucial to the disciplinary apparatus of what

[Ruth Rogaski has called hygienic modernity](#) insofar as it permitted utopian visions of a disease-free humanity *qua* a humanity separated efficiently enough from “nature”.

Zoonotic diagrams proliferating since the 1940s became emblematic of this schema of infection. Depicting the “reproduction” of disease amongst non-human animals through cyclical feedback loops and human infection in the form of linear arrows (a long-standing convention of pestilential affliction), they brought together the two temporalities of infection, visualising their pathogenic intersection as a locus of biopolitical actionability (rat-proofing, DDT, extermination, etc). In the context of this temporal metaphysics of infection, the sudden end of an epidemic could be attributed to it having (or having been) returned to its “enzootic” phase of slow, low-mortality reproduction in some remote corner of the natural realm; sufficiently distanced from humanity to avert serious concern.

In recent years, however, the temporal metaphysics of infection have shifted under the gravitational force of a new doxa: emergence. No longer sufficient are the cycles and arrows of pestilence. No more the safe boundaries between animal and human, guarded by cybernetic thresholds of some epizootic transformation of quantity (mass animal kill-off) into quality (human infection). In the flux of infectious disease emergence, a new “entangled” topology of infection arises, best visualised perhaps by the increasingly ubiquitous spidergram: more an astrological chart of infectious influence and conjunction than an aetiological diagram. In this context the spontaneous, sudden end of an outbreak takes new proportions. For in the topology of infection defined by emergence, the secession of an epidemic is no longer seen as a retreat “back to nature”; an ontological return of disease to its proper place, providing a sense of security. Instead, it is something that generates anxiety insofar as it is suspected as part of a process which has nothing to do with the old idea that a disease simply runs its course; that it withers away, loses its power or dissipates. Seen instead as a stratagem, inherent to the being of the disease, this is now seen as a process that allows the latter to return not to “nature”, but instead to a state of *being-unseen*; in other words, to the imperceptible complexity of the folds and connections between “influences”, “drivers” and “factors” – visualised so aptly, in the case of spidergrams, the form of a cobweb of significance where the weaver, to use the Geertzian idiom, is forever suspended. This retreat of disease into the very “fabric” of infection, disallows human intervention on the basis of an opportune time (*kairos*). It is in this sense that these epidemic endings are configured and experienced not merely as *premature* but as *untimely*, precipitating not only an in situ epidemiological crisis, but, most importantly, a crisis as regards the survival of humanity as such.

“Untimely ends” can then be best approached as transformative topoi

between the symbolic order of really existing epidemics and the pandemic imaginary, as a vision of the (biological and ontological) end of humanity. Rather than just bridging experience and anticipation, they create the conditions of possibility of transference between the thinkable and the unthinkable. Not mere “facts of consciousness”, chez [Adorno](#), but repositories and at the same time catalysts of the dialectic between a post-human vision and the phantasmagoria of humanity’s Being-in-itself, “untimely ends” can come to be understood as organising consciousness vis-à-vis the enduring spectre of human extinction.

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