

The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis

2020-05-21 08:09:08

By

What is the significance of COVID-19? The honest response is that I don't know which, however, does not prevent me from thinking that it has something crucial to tell us. COVID-19 is both real and global and yet it manifests itself allegorically and unevenly. Some get sick, others die, and a growing few turn off and deny. COVID-19 is a virus which, just like any other virus, dwells in a strange liminal space in-between true fiction and a parallel reality. Episodes of pestilence, as [Dr Bernard Rieux](#) uncovered in Camus' *The Plague*, are located somewhere between storytelling and trauma as a "bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away... [They are] not made to man's measure." And yet, as Oran's doctor knows full well, the atmosphere of fear and suffering could not be more profound and meaningful.

COVID-19 is personal and collective, unprecedentedly new and prehistorical, human and much more-than-human, a potential opening and a political failing, it is nightmare and hope, between isolation and unity, fracture and healing, about uncertainty and trust, concealment and disclosure, and, of course, everything in between and more. In what follows, I explore the significance of COVID-19 through four dimensions: temporality, nonhuman, war and solidarity.

Temporality

COVID-19 appears to move at various speeds and in different temporalities. Its ambiguously slow and covert invasion of bodies might have been one of the reasons why early official responses seemed sluggish, inadequate and confused. When authorities did react, through biopolitical interventions, which started with amusing hand-wash instruction videos before soon culminating in police drones monitoring bodily mobility, the pace of everyday life slowed down rapidly. Busy cities today appear as if stuck in time, and animals, once in hiding, are now quick to discover a place in abandoned urban squares. With billions of people around the world under "lockdown", accelerating the trend of moving social interactions into the virtual, perhaps the most uncanny affect is the temporal experiencing of this crisis. Days, minutes, seconds, mornings and evenings, light and darkness, previously all structured by strict divisions of work- and free time, are all perceived and lived

differently. These changes, including the profound sense of “boredom with the apocalypse”, will and already are starting to have a profound impact on [human psychology](#).

COVID-19’s rapid unfolding constitutes a suspension of the temporality of the period that preceded it. Things appear in pause. Has the old been suspended temporarily, or does the break forge an opening into entirely new temporality? Under what conditions, and who will decide when it is appropriate to look (and think) back from a future place and time of certainty? How will the past look like from this future, and how will COVID-19 be remembered as part of that past? Alternatively, is this the “new normal”, a term which was first coined during the crisis of World War I, but that is now best remembered for its association with the 2001 and 2008 crises, or is a [return](#) to the “old normal”, or yet another, perhaps more utopian, version possible? Is COVID-19 a beginning, or an end? Of course, there is also the distinct possibility that it is neither. Daniel Defoe’s fictive [journal](#) of the 1665 bubonic plague, which ravaged London, is disturbing because by the time he wrote it (in 1722) most inhabitants already had forgotten about it. For COVID-19 to have temporal significance, it needs to be remembered, not as a sudden crisis, but as part of the last of a longer series of crises. This means turning COVID-19 (and responses to it) on its head by means of analysing it not as an unexpected event outside of history but as a radical disjunction, an opening, from the old into the new.

Nonhuman

Exposing the fragility of [ecological](#) and [economic interconnectedness](#), COVID-19 is firmly inside time but moves also outside of it, bending it (and, by extension, us) to its will. COVID-19 appears in non-human guise, although it moves through and feeds from human bodies. It “invades”, granting it autonomy and agency, but the purpose and meaning of its “invasion” is perhaps less clear than other crises. What does COVID-19, or any biological virus, want? Infection and replication, yes, of course, but what it wants even more from the human body is to evolve together-with/ in it. The dependency on a host’s metabolism and replication machinery plays out covertly and over long stretches of time. In a now famous [paper](#), published in 2006, the American virologists Jeffery Taubenberger and David Morens show that almost all of the human influenza cases of the last 100 years, killing millions, stem from one single viral genetic sequence, H1N1, which first appeared as the Spanish Flu. This “Mother of All Pandemics”, as the two scientists gendered the outbreak, might have started in 1918, but it certainly did not end then. It has co-evolved with the human body and formed to grow a part of it.

Although SARS-CoV-2 is not an influenza, there exists a distinct possibility

that humans will have to learn to live together with it in the same way the virus will have to learn to “live” with/ inside us without killing us. [Geneticists](#) remind us that “[m]icrobes indeed have a knack for making us ill, killing us, and even recycling our remains to the geosphere. But in the long run microbes have a shared interest in their hosts’ survival: A dead host is a dead end for most invaders too.” Such co-dependency is a reminder that “humans are an inextricable blend of mammal and virus. Remove our virus-derived genes, and we would be unable to reproduce” ([Zimmer](#)). One lesson that can be drawn from COVID-19 is that it has a firmer claim to sovereignty than (any) human does.

War

Governments around the world have deployed imaginaries of a global war to mobilise against the contagion. [A former director](#) of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention went a step further and declared that “World War C” pits “humans against the coronavirus.” Such terminology rests on and evokes easily digestible divisions between an “us”, which claims to speak for an untrue human universalism, and a “them”, describing an organism whose “[lives](#)” is intimately interwoven with those of our own. The Italian journalist [Massimo Giannini](#) writes that “we are not ‘in’ danger, we ‘are’ the danger.” However, the intent of this “enemy” is not to act in opposition to humans, supposedly with the malign objective to destroy “us” from within, it is not interested in our bodies’ dying, although it killed and will kill more, instead it follow an entirely different intentionality which merely propels it to inhabit us.

The fact that this is not a Manichean war between good and evil, or one that leaves in its wake damaged factories and roads, has not prevented the logic and sensationalism of exactly such a vision to call into being a radical state of exception. The narrative of an “us” threatened by an insidious and cunning “other”, who is scheming and plotting to infiltrate “our” defences and invade “our” body underneath the skin, is an old trope of the xenophobic right. [US President Trump](#) identified the location of the “invisible enemy” not from within the national body politic but from beyond it. Few were surprised to see how COVID-19 was evoked by the xenophobic Hungarian Government to enable the sitting Prime Minister to rule by decree for an indefinite period. His [spokesman](#) explains that: “Just as in wartime, a state of emergency could extend until the end of hostilities. Today, we confront not a military power but are in a war-like state to defend our people against a pandemic the likes of which we have not seen in a century.” COVID-19, hailed as “the great equaliser” whose sovereignty can be identified by its signature Corona crown, could care less for false divisions between us and them, animal or human or, indeed, life and death.

Hungary, of course, is not alone in abusing COVID-19 to suspend [democratic process](#), [environmental standards](#), [labour laws](#) and many other [rights](#) of the [long-eroding liberal order](#). The UK's latest [coronavirus bill](#) grants police officers and immigration services the power to detain a person "who is, or may be, infectious". The think-tank of Britain's former PM Blair states that [mass surveillance](#) is simply a price to pay. The theorist of sovereign power, the Italian philosopher [Giorgio Agamben](#), recognises the present moment as "the state of exception, to which governments have habituated us for some time.... It is not surprising that for the virus one speaks of war... But a war with an 'invisible enemy' that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars." And yet, despite all that Agamben warns about, COVID-19 could not be more real, destructive, and deadly. And, I should note, its "virality" has only just started.

Solidarity

After the storm has passed, when the "miracle cure" has arrived, and the effects of double-digit economic contraction and mass unemployment are clear as day, it is the rich and wealthy that will have most to fear. [Marco D'Eramo](#), arguing contra Agamben's paranoia, notes that "while the philosophers view anti-contagion measures—curfews, closed borders, restrictions on public gatherings—as a sinister control mechanism, the rulers fear the lockdowns will loosen their control." COVID-19 did not deliver the cataclysmic scenes of faceless masses running amok. Toilet roll runs make a mockery of the Armageddon. As millions turned to help neighbours, friends and strangers, the opposite seems truer. [Anastasia Berg](#) reminds us that the reason why many respond to the ethical call to self-isolate, does not refer to the bare life of the "I" but to the political life of the "we". "[W]e are not making sacrifices for the sake of anyone's mere survival. We sacrifice because sharing our joys and pains, efforts and leisure, with our loved ones — young and old, sick and healthy — is the very substance of these so-called 'normal conditions of life.'"

An important question, [one](#) that is on the [mind](#) of [many](#), is if these newly forged relations of solidarity, build from sacrifice and defiance, can be turned against the structures responsible for the perpetual crisis that is capitalism. [Greece's former Finance Minister](#), experienced with the potentiality of crises, speculates that "[w]hether the epidemic helps deliver the good or the most evil society will depend, of course, on us – on whether progressives manage to band together." As the "[magic money-tree](#)" is suddenly found by the same elite that now realises that "really is such [a thing as society](#)", there is a risk that solidarity will be co-opted merely to maintain the corrupt status quo. "We are in it together", another post-crisis catchphrase, this one introduced by the most divisive British Government since Thatcher, is rehashed and shared

across the political spectrum to describe the supposedly indiscriminate violence of the threat. Of course, as we know, we are not in it together, at least not all equally. COVID-19 worsens the effects of inequality but, as [studies](#) show, it also feeds from it. The significance of the crisis, which should not and cannot be separated from the crisis that *iscapitalism* and that *isclimate* change, is global and interconnected. One final lesson, therefore, is that neoliberalism should be turned on its head, because there simply is no alternative to solidarity.

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I would like to thank Dr Eugene Raikhel and his colleagues for both their patience and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also wish to express my gratitude to Wahid Al Mamun for his dedicated copy-editing work.

AMA citation

. The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed May 25, 2020.

APA citation

. (). *The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis*. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation

. . The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis. *Somatosphere*. (accessed May 25, 2020).

Harvard citation

, *The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis*, *Somatosphere*. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from <>

MLA citation

. "The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis." . *Somatosphere*. Accessed 25 May. 2020.<>