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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The pandemic and the contradictions of contemporaneity

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In this paper I argue that the new coronavirus pandemic has brought to light some of the contradictions and paradoxes of our time, namely the contrast between human fragility and the technological hubris linked to the fourth industrial revolution (artificial intelligence); and the contrast between the TINA ideology (there is no alternative) and the sudden and extreme changes in our everyday life caused by the virus, thus suggesting that there are indeed alternatives. I then analyse the main metaphors that have been used in public discourse concerning our relations with the virus: the virus as an enemy; the virus as a messenger; the virus as pedagogue. I prefer the last one and explain why, and in what sense the virus is our contemporary.

**Key words** pandemic • globalisation • contemporaneity • inequality

### Key messages

- The pandemic marks the beginning of the 21st century.
- We are entering a period of intermittent pandemic.
- The new coronavirus brought to light some of the contradictions of our time, namely the contrast between human fragility and the technological hubris linked to the fourth industrial revolution (artificial intelligence); and the contrast between the TINA ideology (there is no alternative) and the sudden and extreme changes in our everyday life which suggest that there are indeed alternatives.
- The virus is our contemporary in more senses than we can imagine at this point.

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## The end of presentism

Since the 1980s the world has lived in thrall to the notion that there is no alternative to present-day society, particularly in the Global North: that there is no alternative to the way society is organised and how it organises our lives, our work or lack thereof, our consumer habits or our desire to consume, our time or lack thereof, our social

life and the feeling of contempt and loneliness it so often generates; that there is no alternative to the insecurity of having a job one minute and losing it the next, or to giving up the fight for a better life in the face of the always imminent possibility that life might get even worse.

This blocking of alternatives went hand in hand with the notion that progress had been fully achieved. What lay behind us was certainly much worse and what lay ahead would be, if not worse, at best more of the same. The future was right then and there, and if we insisted on looking for it elsewhere we would be unpleasantly surprised. Hence the rigidity of an eternal present, seemingly free of the past and looking forward to no future at all but its own eternalisation. It was either such a present or barbarism. I call this epochal climate presentism: the radical, simultaneous negation of historicism and of futurism. But what kind of world supported this eternal present? It was a world in which, the more 'progress' it made, the more intolerable and uninhabitable it became for the vast majority of its population. It was a world of distorted possibilities, a world that sacrificed all emancipatory potentialities to actions allegedly taken in their name but actually designed to annul them. It was a sacrificial frenzy.

Let us take a look at some of these distorted possibilities. Since Classical Greece, democracy has conceived of itself as government by the majority for the benefit of the majorities. Today, almost everywhere, it has become government by the minority for the benefit of minorities. Law and legal systems were first designed to protect the weak from the discretionary power of the strong. However, in many countries nowadays they are used by the powerful as one more tool against the oppressed, and even as an anti-democratic tool to destroy or neutralise political or economic adversaries by means of what convention, following military handbooks, has come to term lawfare (Dunlap, 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006; Kittrie, 2016; Gloppen, 2018; Zanin et al, 2021). Despite their ambivalent genealogy (for they have served both the interests of the Cold War and the fight against dictatorships), human rights have emerged as a narrative of human dignity and risen to become a conditionality of international treaties and so-called development assistance. More recently it ceased to be a conditionality and has come to be viewed by extremist right-wing groups as an irrelevant obstacle, if not outright anathema (Santos and Martins, 2021). These groups use social media to call politicians on the left 'human rights activists', which they consider the most effective insult. The concept of development was once the promise of better living conditions for the majority of people. It may have been an empty promise, but it became enormously credible, only to lose this credibility as a result of the growing inequality between countries and regions of the world, and the imminent ecological catastrophe (Haraway, 2015; Tsing, 2015; Malm, 2016; Krenak, 2020). Finally, social networks and the internet, which once seemed a major credible promise of a more democratic social and political life, are becoming the principal instrument for surveillance capitalism and the destruction of the democratic will (Zuboff, 2019).

These and other distorted possibilities have imbued the Eurocentric world – the Global North – with a feeling of political and ideological burnout, of living a life among ruins (Santos, 2018). This has nothing to do with the aesthetic experience of ruins, such as the one that prevailed in European romanticism (Santos, 2018: 30). It is, rather, the existential experience of inhabiting a landscape of collapsing foundations, where the dominant feeling is that things are falling apart (Achebe, 1959). This is

a novel experience for the Global North alone. In fact, this same experience was imposed on conquered peoples by colonialism, especially from the 16th century onwards. Since then, the Global South<sup>1</sup> has become accustomed to living among ruins and to resisting and innovating on that basis. Perhaps this long experience will now prove more precious than ever, and not just for the Global South.

### **All that is solid melts into air**

There is a debate in the social sciences about whether it is easier to ascertain the truthfulness and quality of a society's institutions under normal daily circumstances or in exceptional situations, during times of crisis. One can probably learn from both types of situation, but each of them is certain to foreground and teach us different things. The coronavirus pandemic has provided much potential knowledge. This paper offers a brief summary.

#### *The normality of exception*

Since the 1980s – as neoliberalism established itself as the leading version of capitalism, increasingly dependent on the logic of the financial sector – the world has been living in a permanent state of crisis. This is an anomalous situation for two reasons. On the one hand, the notion of a permanent crisis is an oxymoron, given that etymologically a crisis is both exceptional and temporary in nature, as well as an opportunity to overcome a predicament and move on to a better state of affairs. On the other hand, being temporary, a crisis must be explained by the factors that gave rise to it, yet in turning into something permanent, it becomes the cause that explains everything else. For example, the unending financial crisis is used to explain cuts to social policies (health, education, social welfare) or falling wages. It has thus successfully staved off questions about the real causes of the crisis. The purpose of a permanent crisis is to prevent it from being overcome. But what is the purpose of such a purpose? It is essentially twofold: to legitimise the scandalous concentration of wealth, and to forestall effective measures aimed at preventing the imminent ecological disaster. This is the way we have lived these past 40 years. Viewed in this light, the coronavirus pandemic is a pandemic inside a pandemic, merely worsening a crisis situation that has been afflicting the world population for some decades now. Hence its specific perilousness. Even as recently as the first decade of the 21st century, the state as a whole and the public health services of many countries in particular were better prepared to fight a pandemic such as the coronavirus pandemic than they are now.

#### *The elasticity of the social*

In every historical era the dominant modes of living (work, consumption, leisure, coexistence) and of warding off death are relatively rigid and appear to stem from rules etched in the stone of human nature. These modes keep changing little by little, so the changes tend to go unnoticed. The outbreak of the pandemic was incompatible with this type of change. It called for dramatic changes, which became possible from one moment to the next, as if this possibility had been there all along (Knorr et al, 2020). It suddenly became possible, at least for a minority of the world's population, to stay at home and find the time to read a book again or spend more time with the

family, to consume less, to forgo the addiction of whiling away time in shopping centres, forgetting or neglecting all the things that cannot be found in such spaces for the simple reason that they are not commodities. The conservative notion that there is no alternative to the mode of life forced on us by hypercapitalism has collapsed. It has become evident that the reason there are no alternatives is because the democratic political system has been shaped into abandoning any consideration of alternatives. Expelled from the political system, the alternatives are increasingly likely to enter the lives of citizens through the back door of pandemic crises, environmental disasters and financial collapses. In other words, the alternatives are bound to come back in the worst possible manner.

### *The fragility of the human*

The apparent rigidity of social solutions generates an odd sense of security among the classes benefiting the most from them. Some measure of insecurity will always remain, of course, but there are means and resources available to allay this, whether in the form of private healthcare, insurance policies, services provided by private security companies, psychotherapy or gyms. This sense of security is combined with feelings of arrogance towards all those who feel victimised and are made vulnerable by these very social solutions. The viral catastrophe interrupted common sense and caused this sense of security to evaporate overnight. We have learned that the pandemic is neither blind nor democratic and that it has its preferred targets (Ryan and Nanda, 2022). However, in spite of all this, it has generated an odd common awareness of planetary communion. The tragedy is that, in the present situation, the best way to show solidarity with one another is to physically isolate ourselves and refrain from even touching one another. Are we to accept that this is the only possible common destiny? Couldn't we fight for another?

### *The ends do not justify the means*

The negative impact of the economic slowdown has been quite obvious, especially in the more industrialised countries. However, there have also been some positive consequences, such as the decrease in air pollution (Venter et al, 2020). An air quality expert from the US space agency (NASA) stated that such a dramatic drop in pollution has never been observed before over such a vast area.<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that at the beginning of the 21st century the only way to avoid the approaching ecological disaster is by mass destruction of human life? Have we lost our cautionary imagination and the political capacity to put it into practice?

It is also widely known that, in order to control the pandemic effectively, China has resorted to extremely harsh methods of repression and surveillance. It is becoming increasingly evident that these measures have proved effective (Peng, 2021).<sup>3</sup> Yet, whatever other merits China may have, it cannot be said to be a democratic country. It is extremely doubtful that such measures could be implemented, or implemented with the same level of effectiveness, in a democratic country. Does that mean that democracy lacks the political capacity to respond to emergencies? Considering that democracies are more and more vulnerable to fake news, will we have to imagine democratic solutions based on participatory democracy practised at neighbourhood and community level, and on civic education geared towards solidarity and

cooperation rather than towards entrepreneurship and competitiveness at all costs? The truth is that democratic countries such as South Korea in Asia or New Zealand in Oceania have been quite successful in combating the pandemic. Shouldn't civic culture henceforth be recognised as a fundamental public health resource?

*The war of which peace is made*

The way in which the pandemic narrative was first framed by the Eurocentric media made it clear that there had been a deliberate attempt to demonise China. The poor hygiene in China's live animal markets and the strange eating habits of the Chinese people (implying barbarism) were supposed to be the cause of the disease. Subliminally, people across the world were thus being warned of the danger that China, now the world's second economy, may come to rule the world. If China had proved incapable of preventing such harm to global health, how could one possibly trust the technology of the future proposed by China? But did the virus actually originate in China? The fact is that, according to the World Health Organization, the origin of the virus is still to be determined.<sup>4</sup> It was therefore irresponsible for US officials to speak of the 'foreign virus' or the 'Chinese coronavirus', not least because only countries with good public health systems (which does not include the US) were in a position to provide free testing and accurately determine which types of influenza virus and coronavirus had occurred in recent months. One of the great revelations of the pandemic was that world peace is being threatened by the exacerbation of a trade war between China and the US, an all-out war which, by all indications, must end with a winner and a loser.

*The sociology of absences*

A pandemic of this magnitude is ample cause for a worldwide commotion. Although a modicum of drama is justified, it is always as well to heed the shadows created by visibility. Here are some of the absences.<sup>5</sup> For some time, the political establishment successfully suggested that there was a trade-off between the protection of life and a healthy economy. The economy was thus allowed to prosper on a pile of corpses. The pitiful extreme rise in deaths caused by COVID-19 in the US, Brazil and India served as cruel proof that such a trade-off never existed. There was also an attempt to sell the notion that the coronavirus is democratic, but the tragic reality is quite different. How else can we account for the fact that the virus predominantly ravages racialised, segregated and impoverished populations? Furthermore, although they have proved incapable of effectively protecting their populations, many states have resorted to the rhetoric of protection to enhance their powers of repression and surveillance, thereby creating or intensifying situations of permanent exception. Finally, a surfeit of pandemic statistics and progress charts has often been used to prevent or stamp out any discussion of the real causes of the recurrence of pandemics, lest the current development models be questioned.

*The tragic transparency of the virus*

The things the pandemic has allowed us to see and the way in which they will be interpreted and assessed will determine the future of the civilisation in which we

live. The pandemic heralds an age of greater uncertainty, a lifeworld populated by unsettling, invisible, all-powerful beings. Such beings have taken the form of gods and markets, and from now on viruses will be added to the list. While gods and markets acquire their omnipotence from being immensely large, viruses achieve this by being immensely small. Although omnipresent, all these invisible beings fit into their own specific spaces: viruses in bodies, gods in temples, markets in stock exchanges. Outside these spaces, the human being is likely to become a transcendental homeless being.

The pandemic is proving so dynamic and unpredictable as it unfolds that theorising and writing about involves placing our categories and language on the edge of the abyss. It involves conceiving of contemporary society and its dominant culture as *mise en abyme*,<sup>6</sup> as André Gide would put it.

### **The scale of the planet viewed by the virus**

The pandemic has caused the biggest scale change in the life of both humans and the planet since 1972. On 7 December of that year, during the last Apollo mission to the moon, the astronauts in the spacecraft took the first photos of Earth, from an altitude of 29,000 kilometres. The result was *The Blue Marble*, an amazing picture of our planet that soon became the most widely reproduced image in history and profoundly altered the dominant representation of the scale of the planet within the universe.<sup>7</sup> What, until then, had looked infinitely large and ungraspable to ordinary mortals now presented itself as a small sphere spinning in a truly infinite universe. On this new scale, ours looked like a world in miniature, a tiny common home driven by a common destiny that made it spin regularly through infinite space. In the face of such a strong image of community, all conflicts, differences and disagreements necessarily became relativised.

The coronavirus has produced the same scale effect by resorting to other, far less grandiose, methods. Today the world seems more global than it had ever been made to appear by the dynamics of capitalism and colonialism. And not just more global, but smaller as well. Despite all the inequalities created or exacerbated by the spread, prevention and mitigation of the virus, its expansion was surprising, unpredictable and chaotic. This time the agent producing this scale change does not come from remote outer space. On the contrary, it originates from the innermost recesses of life on this planet. The virus is an inner, stealthy astronaut traversing the deep porosities between human and non-human life, on a journey that has increased in speed and aggressiveness as a result of irresponsible and arrogant decisions made by humans that have systematically favoured human life to the detriment of non-human life on this planet.

There are, however, significant differences between the two scale changes. The scale change produced by the outer-space astronauts was an auspicious one. At best it brought to light the levity and even futility of rivalries between countries, geopolitical alliances and human groups. The scale change caused by the inner astronaut is a threatening one and calls for a change of course, lest it continue its destruction of human life. Whether such a change will occur or not remains an open question for the time being, but the consequences will be immediate. While the outer-space astronaut showed the close symbiosis between human and non-human life, the inner astronaut shows that, in the event of conflict, non-human life will continue on the

planet even if human life comes to an end. In other words, human life needs the planet more than the planet needs human life.

In the face of such a radical scale change, political action will have to change too. Just consider such slogans as ‘America first’ or ‘Make America great again’, proclaimed ad nauseam by ex-president Donald Trump, and how much more laughable and even grotesque they sounded once the pandemic irrupted. All of a sudden, the US, the richest country in the world, was one of the most vulnerable to the pandemic; the country with enough military and nuclear power to destroy several worlds proved incapable of producing the basic goods needed to protect its citizens, and its medical and healthcare providers in particular. The coronavirus has thus produced the second miniaturisation of the world scale of the last 50 years. The first – that of the outer-space astronauts – failed to produce the anticipated effects. It failed to put an end to rivalries between states and geopolitical alliances, namely the Cold War. In fact, the outer-space race was itself an offshoot of the Cold War, which ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The ‘peace dividend’, the opportunity to channel the public money spent on the arms race into social policies aimed at improving the well-being of citizens and communities, never happened. The entente with the former Soviet Union, now Russia, was short-lived. The struggle for geostrategic influence in Europe (the Ukraine war), the Middle East (the wars in Iraq and Syria), in Africa (the war in Libya) and, finally, in Latin America (the crisis in Venezuela) erupted once again. In the meantime, the Cold War returned and began to shift to the east, particularly since the start of the new millennium, with China as the other side of the new axis. It did not take long for China to progress from major economic partner of the US to a competing power and, finally, an enemy whose global influence needs to be neutralised.

In what concerns the second miniaturisation of the world scale caused by the pandemic, the prevention of future pandemics is a planetary task that can only be addressed on a planetary level. Whether this will happen or not remains an open question for now. The current signs do not allow us much hope. It is by now clear that there will be no global health security until virtually the whole world is vaccinated. Instead of an effort in that direction we are witnessing the emergence of a vaccine apartheid. From a technical point of view, vaccines could be made quickly and easily accessible to every person in the world, based on the principle that a human life is worth as much in Mumbai as it is in Brussels. The only reason this is not possible is because the large pharmaceutical companies producing the vaccines refuse to waive their patent rights. Their profit projections on what has already been called ‘liquid gold’ are huge. According to the findings of a study by Imperial College London, the costs of the Pfizer vaccine add up to US\$1.18 a dose and Moderna’s costs US\$2.85 to produce. The two have been selling, on average, for US\$25.15 and US\$25.50 a dose, respectively, which is more than ten times the cost (Light and Lexchin, 2021). What’s more, the big companies expect to raise their prices significantly once the pandemic is declared over. Such profits are simply not acceptable, given that research has relied mostly on public funding. Besides, according to the *Financial Times*, the pharmaceutical companies are demanding that the countries of the Global South effect legislative changes prior to vaccine delivery. These changes are aimed at protecting companies against future lawsuits or patent waivers, forcing countries, for example, to commit public funds for that purpose – a move denounced by South Africa as an ‘illegitimate surrender of national sovereignty’<sup>8</sup>. The issue of patent suspension

is currently being discussed within the World Trade Organization, whose default solution is to decide in favour of powerful economic interests (Cass, 2005). It is clear that the COVAX initiative (an international partnership to ensure global equitable access to patent-protected COVID-19 vaccines) will not be enough (Borowy, 2021). COVAX has distributed a mere 1.4 billion of the 11 billion doses it promised to deliver in 2021. Over 60 per cent of the population of rich countries have already been vaccinated with multiple doses, while in Africa only 6 per cent of people have received vaccinations, and only one dose at that. There is currently a worldwide outcry to put an end to this gross injustice, which is also a major source of insecurity for the world as a whole.

The miniaturisation of the world caused by the pandemic is being counteracted by the expanding abyss separating the astronomic scale of profits that patented vaccines allow a very tiny minority to pocket from the equally astronomic scale of suffering and avoidable loss of life in the vast unprotected world.

## Metaphors in progress

The new coronavirus gave rise to an abundance of metaphors, all of them involving a major shift away from the contexts in which such metaphors are commonly used. This, in itself, tells us a lot about the shock and astonishment generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The metaphors are simply an attempt to tame the virus qua phenomenon, framing it in terms that we are able to grasp on a social, philosophical and cultural level. Far from being arbitrary, these metaphors are selectively proposed. They point to different types of action and conjure up different post-pandemic societies. I would identify three metaphors: the virus as enemy, the virus as messenger and the virus as pedagogue.

### *The virus as enemy*

The virus as an enemy to be fought was the favourite metaphor of governments. War falls within the exclusive competence of the state: among all the tasks performed by the state, defence against an enemy is likely to generate the broadest consensus. The war metaphor was effective as it conveyed the idea of the gravity of the threat and the patriotic need to unite in the fight against it. The call for unity was especially useful in states recently hit by widespread social protests, as was the case with the yellow vest (*gilets jaunes*) demonstrations in France. The war metaphor presupposes the use of extreme combat measures. It promotes a simplistic political narrative, of the you're-either-with-us-or-against-us type. An enemy is not to be persuaded or argued with, but eliminated. The enemy metaphor suffers from two main biases. On the one hand, it considers that anti-pandemic measures come exclusively from the state although the fight against the pandemic also enlists the staunch support of families, communities, associations and, first and foremost, healthcare providers, whose sense of mission has by far exceeded their obligations as public servants. On the other hand, this metaphor suggests that, once the war is won, everything will go back to normal. Now, in all likelihood this will not be the case, not only because a 'final victory' sounds very unlikely, but also because, were such a victory ever to happen, the new normal will be quite different from what it used to be before the pandemic.



Since the Second World War, the war metaphor has been widely used in the Western world to denote a perception of the gravity of the perils threatening to destroy it. If history serves as a lesson, these were designed as permanent or even perpetual wars. This has been the case with the war against communism, even though communism no longer exists in the world, not even in China, where state capitalism is now the law of the land. The same applies to the war on terrorism, the war on drugs and, in more recent times, the war on corruption. None of these wars have come to an end yet, nor are they expected to do so in the near future. Will it be the same with the war against this pandemic? Interestingly enough, the war against recent pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola or dengue fever, shares with other permanent wars the fact that it is an irregular war. The enemy is elusive and deceptive. It has no regard for the laws of war and eschews conventional tactics. Is the war against the COVID-19 pandemic a new war, to be added to the list of permanent or eternal wars? We are entering a period of intermittent pandemic. Even with a vaccine, unless our current model of development, consumption and civilisation is altered, other pandemics are highly likely to strike. Therefore, we may well be facing the most permanent of all the previous permanent wars. Such a possibility should be cause for concern, and not just because it means the recurrence of ever more frequent and more lethal viruses. In fact, the permanent wars already mentioned have served the interests of those who declare them, in achieving ends that have nothing to do with the ends they originally declared. They have served, first and foremost, to neutralise political opponents and exert control over areas of geostrategic influence. Will the war against the virus lend itself to such uses? Some disturbing signs can be discerned. Viewed against the backdrop of the world's major powers (the US, China and the EU), the war against the pandemic is part of the war for geostrategic hegemony waged between China and the US – and the same can be said of the vaccine wars.

Aside from everything else, the war metaphor has a negative impact on the democratic life of a society engaged in the fighting the virus. Times of war are exceptional times, when orders are to be obeyed, not debated. There is no room for reasoning or for coming up with alternatives. After all, unconditional obedience is supposed to be for our own good and if we do not obey, we put our lives and the lives of others at risk. The war puts overwhelming pressure on citizenship, on civil rights. This pressure will not be fatal as long as it is short-lived. But what if it isn't?

In short, the war and enemy metaphor does not help us imagine a better society, that is, one that is more diverse with regard to intercultural experiences, more democratic, more equal, more just and less exposed to lethal viruses than the present one. This metaphor expresses a death drive directed against the death threat posed by the virus. It pits death against death, telling us nothing about the possibility and desirability of a no-war scenario. Given all this, it does not strike me as a very hopeful metaphor. Things could be different if the war and enemy metaphor were deconstructed to let us see and understand the real life and enemies engaged in this war. After all, it stands to reason that if the virus is the enemy of society, then maybe society is the enemy of the virus. It would therefore be wise to follow the example of war photographer Karim Ben Khelifa, as presented in his remarkable documentary *The Enemy*.<sup>9</sup> After 15 years as a war photographer, he began to question the usefulness of his photos, since they had totally failed to change people's attitudes towards the war and make them desire peace. He came to the conclusion that one of the reasons was perhaps the fact that the enemies remained invisible. He therefore decided to make the combatants visible,

by giving them a voice and allowing them to introduce themselves and explain their motives, dreams and fears. Resorting to advanced communication technologies, he allowed the enemy point of view to confront the point of view of those fighting on the opposite side. With this, enemies ceased to be enemies. Would we be able to do the same in the case of the war against the virus? How can one make nano-entities visible? How can we begin to know their reasons for attacking us and their points of view on the society in which we live? What reasons would we provide for trying to eliminate or at least neutralise them? Could we be convinced to substantially alter our ways of life in order to obtain a peaceful coexistence with the deadly viruses? Would it then be possible to establish, not just a truce, but true coexistence based on more civilised behaviour from both sides? Without such deconstruction, and despite Karim Ben Khelifa's remarkable work, the sad fact is that war is war, and it is all about killing and getting killed.

### *The virus as messenger*

The second metaphor conceives of the virus as a messenger, a messenger from nature, for certain. With this metaphor, the specific content or details of the message are irrelevant, for the message resides in the very presence of the virus. It is a performative message. It can also transmit a horrible message, spelling death or the threat of death. This message leaves us with the question of what to do with the messenger. In Eastern tradition, and in China in particular, there used to be an unspoken agreement whereby messengers sent by any of the warring parties would travel unarmed and at no personal risk. In Western tradition, on the other hand, there is a long, recurring history, going all the way back to ancient Egypt and Greece, of messengers being killed for being the bearers of bad news. Hence the phrase 'kill the messenger' has become a cultural topos and a form of political tactics. In his *Lives*, Plutarch tells the story of Tigranes who, upset by the news that Lucullus' forces were closing in on him, murdered the messenger to mitigate his own anxiety. In Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra threatens to gouge out the eyes of the messenger who brings her the news that Antony has married Octavius Caesar's sister, Octavia. The 'shoot the messenger' topos is still very much present today: it will suffice to consider the way in which Julian Assange is being treated (slowly murdered is perhaps how we ought to put it) for delivering so many bad messages to the powerful of the Western world.

'Shoot the messenger' is the operative cultural archetype in the case of the virus-as-messenger metaphor. Granted, a small number of those who resort to this metaphor favour it over the enemy metaphor precisely because they are determined to understand the message, no matter how painful it may be. However, in the context of public discourse, even when the virus-as-messenger metaphor is used, not a single minute is spent attempting to decode it. The panic or terror over the performative message (death or the threat of death) is such that no attempt is made to investigate the cause of death, as would be the case with any criminal investigation or detective novel. All follow-up action is a non sequitur in terms of the meanings of the message. As far as society is concerned, it is enough to dislike the news brought by the virus. It does not attempt to confront it, far less face the probable reasons behind it. Instead, it concentrates every effort on killing the messenger. For this reason, the virus-as-messenger metaphor does not strike me as helpful in terms of enabling us to prevent the arrival of new messengers in the future, possibly bearing even more terrifying

news. Like the enemy metaphor, the messenger metaphor focuses on eliminating this virus. It can prove useful in defending us in the present, but not in the future.

### *The virus as pedagogue*

My personal preference is for the virus-as-pedagogue metaphor, the only one that requires us to try to understand the virus and the underlying motives for its behaviour and, as a result, to try and organise social responses aimed at reducing the probability of being intruded upon in such an unwelcome way again by future viruses. To conceive of the virus as a pedagogue is to grant it a dignity far superior to any bestowed by the preceding metaphors. For the war metaphor, the virus is an enemy to be beaten, whereas the messenger metaphor views the virus as a carrier with no significant role in the rivalries at play. As a carrier, it will certainly only tell us what the messenger told Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play: 'Gracious madam, / I that do bring the news made not the match'.<sup>10</sup> The pedagogue metaphor is the only one that makes us interact with the virus as a subject worthy of engaging in dialogue. It is certainly a cruel pedagogue that does not waste time explaining the reasons for its behaviour and simply acts as it is supposed to act. Yet it is not an irrational being. It had its own reasons for coming to us at this point and in the way it did. It is therefore imperative that we think *about the virus* in such a way that we gradually begin to think *with it*, and end up thinking *from its point of view*.

Thus, I propose a diatopic hermeneutics (Santos, 2014), an interpretation of the world that engages both human rationality and viral rationality, located between human life and non-human life, in the hope of reaching, through mutual concessions or transformations, points of convergence between society and nature, leading to a new coexistence between humans and non-humans. The hermeneutics in question aims to learn from the virus and apply what we learn from it in society. Thus viewed, it amounts to an interval pedagogy, halfway between human and non-human life. It will not be an easy pedagogy to embrace. Difficulties abound, at many levels. Is it possible to learn from someone we have never seen or never will see? Will such learning be different from the divine revelations to be found in most religions? Furthermore, is society open to learning? I actually think that most people see the virus as a nightmare from which they want to awake as fast as possible, in which case the drive to forget will be stronger than the drive to learn. On the other hand, if we agree, as I have been arguing, that we must learn from the virus (Santos, 2020), the learning process will face huge obstacles. The best pedagogical theories teach us that all learning must be co-learning, that is, reciprocal learning aimed at mutual education. Supposing we follow Paulo Freire's (1970) celebrated pedagogy of the oppressed, who is the oppressed – us or the virus?

All these difficulties notwithstanding, I believe that the virus-as-pedagogue metaphor presents us with a task at once viable and urgent. We must start by engaging in deep listening with the virus. Dominant Western knowledge has never taught us how to listen deeply to anything (Santos, 2018: 292–6). It has only taught us how to hear, but hearing is the poorest and most superficial form of listening. To hear is to allow oneself to understand only what we consider relevant, whether pleasant or unpleasant, in the light of our interests. Once we are the dominant part in the act of listening, we only hear and value what interests us. When conducting interviews, what most sociologists, anthropologists or journalists do is hear. If the interviewee

starts to talk about what truly interests or upsets her, she will only be heard if what she says reflects the interviewer's own interests. Everything else is irrelevant, no matter how vital it may be for the interviewee. This would be utterly self-defeating in our pedagogical interactions with the virus.

How does one effect a deep listening of the virus? First of all, we must consider that the virus may well be saying things that only sound unintelligible because we cannot, or do not want to, understand them. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that the virus is a natural being, the difficulties involved in deep listening are particularly debilitating in the context of Eurocentric culture. The way in which Eurocentric human beings have been formatted by this culture has rendered them unable to listen to nature and unwilling to observe it unless it gives them pleasure (contemplation of landscapes) or material advantage (appropriation of natural resources, raw materials and control of labour forces). Deep listening entails a much greater effort: daring to decipher and to comprehend. But how are we to communicate with the virus? In what tongue or language? Given its capacity to infect and kill, the virus seems to excel in factual or performative language. Engaging in argument with it, aiming for an outwardly similar language, will result in neutralising or killing it. But in that case there will be nothing to learn, and we will end up in the realms of the war and enemy metaphor.

In order to learn from the virus, we need to take a step further. We need to be able to build an intercultural translation between human and viral language. I am talking about intercultural translation between the human culture of the infected and the dead, the culture of the healthcare providers who tend to them and the scientific culture of those studying viruses, on the one hand, and the natural culture of the habitats of wild animals where the infectious lethal agents circulate, on the other hand. It is a highly complex task, particularly given the fatal vice to which humans are so addicted, namely anthropocentrism. This vice consists in conceiving of the world in our own image and thus projecting motives onto the virus as if it were one of us. The problem is that if we do this, we will only learn what we already know. It is therefore imperative to start from the assumption that the virus does not think like us, but like a virus. And although it terrifies us, we must comfort ourselves with the idea that, in this respect, we are superior to it. Unlike us, the virus is incapable of imagining that it is possible to think otherwise.

How is interventional translation possible, given the unbridgeable gap between our language and that of the virus? We might even imagine that we and the virus live in separate universes. The problem with this notion is that it makes it impossible to even start to compare the differences and, if comparison is impossible, then learning is even less possible. The notion of co-presence is more productive than that of separate universes. As unfathomable as the virus may be, its presence in our midst is frighteningly unequivocal. We are therefore co-present. In addition to the difficulties inherent in interventional translation, a semiotic code needs to be developed in order to invest co-presence with meaning. Such a code can only be signal-based communication. We have already seen that infection and potential death are the signs of the virus. The whys and wherefores of the signs will only remain opaque as long as the virus is viewed as a natural entity. What if it is more human than we think? I am not referring to the conspiracy theories that claim the virus was created in a laboratory. I am talking about the fact that a pandemic virus is a co-creation of humans and nature, a co-creation that is a product of the way in which human

beings have interfered with natural processes, especially since the 16th century. This lengthy time span coincides with that of modern capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (Santos, 2018). The unfettered exploitation of natural resources, combined with the appropriation of, and discrimination against, everything viewed as being close to the natural world – slaves, women, Indigenous peoples – has interfered with nature to such a degree that what we now view as nature is, to a large extent, a product of that interference. In this light, nature is as human as we are, albeit in a radically different way. The pandemic virus may be said to mirror the pact with devil in Goethe's *Faust* or the monstrosity in separating reason and imagination in *Lo Capricho no 43*, by Goya, according to whom '*el sueño de la razón produce monstruos*' ('the sleep of reason produces monsters').

Thus, the virus is in fact as human as can be, with a humanity that is radically *other* than the humanity we attribute to ourselves. The signs sent out by the virus are no longer opaque but rather transparent, if we bear in mind that the human being who is now being infected by it is the same person who has been infecting and abusing nature for centuries. The two processes are tightly interwoven. Communication is possible in this case: translation and pedagogy are still intercultural, but cease to be interventional in order to become intravital. The virus becomes our contemporary in the deepest sense.

### **The coronavirus, our contemporary**

The coronavirus shares with us the contradictions of our time, both the present past (the past that has not passed) and the present future (the future that will or will not come). This does not mean that it lives the present in the same way we do. Being contemporary entails a dense and even contradictory simultaneity. Since the Second World War we have witnessed a profound rethinking of the notion of contemporaneity, challenging the dominant conceptions of progress and linear time that are a legacy of the 18th- and 19th-century European Enlightenment. The historical process leading to the questioning of this narrow conception of contemporaneity was at once very dramatic and full of hope. It comprised, on the one hand, historical colonialism and the scramble for Africa, two world wars and the atomic bomb, and, on the other hand, the anti-colonial liberation struggles, socialism as an alternative to capitalism, grassroots social movements, the consolidation of Indigenous peoples as historical subjects, the expansion of the democratic mindset and the struggles for sexual, ethno-racial, intellectual and philosophical diversity and so on. The outcome of all these developments was a constellation of conceptions which, although very different, converged in overcoming the previous narrow notion of contemporaneity.

The construction of the broad conception of contemporaneity received contributions from both North-centric/Western and South-centric/Eastern thought. To illustrate the former, Rosa Luxemburg (2003 [1913]) shows that the primitive accumulation of capital theorised by Karl Marx was not a past phenomenon but rather a permanent feature of capitalism; for Walter Benjamin (1968 [1955]), Klee's *Angelus Novus* sees what seems to be the past as one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet; Antonio Gramsci (1971) conceives of the present as an interregnum between a dying order and an emergent one; for Ernst Bloch (1995) the present is a horizon of possibilities, the 'Not Yet';

Reinhart Koselleck (2004) calls for a layered conception of contemporaneity made of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous; Giacomo Marramao (2007) asks why time is both obvious and inexplicable; Bruno Latour (1993) reflects on the end of the matrix of progress at the core of Western modernity; Johannes Fabian (1983) proposes the concept of coevalness in which multiple temporalities of different histories are included.

Concerning South-centric/Eastern thought, José Carlos Mariátegui (2009 [1928]: 212) denounces the ‘original sin of Latin America’ as having been conceived of ‘without the Indian and against the Indian’; W.E.B. Du Bois (1903: 58) questions a society in which part of its population (the African Americans), rather than having problems, is viewed as a problem; Leopold Senghor (1961) proposes the concept of *negritude* to account for the vibrancy and richness of African cultures and ways of life; Mahatma Gandhi refuses an idea of modernisation that erases the contribution of Indian culture and past to building the India of the future (1956); Aimé Césaire denounces how Western-centric progressive ideas and left politics neglect the centrality of colonialism as mode of contemporary domination (1955); Franz Fanon calls for a broadly understood liberation from the violence of colonialism and the dehumanisation caused by systemic racism (1961); Kwame Nkrumah (1965) proposes the concept of neocolonialism to denounce how colonialism continues to condition the life and politics of the newly independent countries; Amílcar Cabral (1979) emphasises the importance of culture in the liberation struggles and the need to fight against dogmatism; Walter Rodney (1973) denounces how the European policies of development underdeveloped Africa; Ranajit Guha (1998) launches a vast programme of decolonising history; Anibal Quijano (2000) proposes the concept of coloniality to capture the systemic racialisation of life generated by colonialism; Mogobe Ramose (1999) proposes the philosophy of Ubuntu as a unique African contribution to world philosophy; Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) proposes a feminist perspective on colonialism and liberation; Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) highlights the importance of oral knowledge and of oral history to capture the full range of contemporary experience; Valentin Mudimbe (1988) denounces how the ‘colonial library’ has prevented the Africans from representing the world in their own terms; Enrique Dussel (2003) shows how the idea of Europe is anchored in the colonial expansion and the New World. This second group stands out for its inclusion of oral, anonymous, African, Asian, Latin American, Indigenous, feminist, popular and other forms of knowledge. It is an immense constellation of conceptions still awaiting not only intercultural translation but also dialogues or ecologies of knowledges and temporalities.

The new conception of contemporaneity is mostly characterised by a type of vision that is holistic without being uniform, diverse without being chaotic, and tends to entail the co-presence of the contradictory, the beautiful and the beastly, the welcome and the unwelcome, the immanent and the transcendent, the ominous and the auspicious, fear and hope, the individual and the community, and the constant struggle to find new correlations of forces among the various components of the whole. Contemporaneity has come to encompass the constant reinvention of the past and the ever unfulfilled aspiration towards the future, the tasks that we conceive of as ‘the present’. Social actors as diverse as artists and Indigenous peoples have shown that the present is a palimpsest, that the past is never a thing of the past, and that to look back and reflect on one’s acquired experiences can prove an effective way to deal with the future.

To be contemporary is to be aware of the fact that the majority of the world's population is contemporary with the Global North, insofar as it has to suffer, endure and resist its global domination, notably capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

Viewed in the context of this wide constellation of contemporaneities, the new coronavirus takes on a hyper-contemporary dimension. As contemporaries of the virus, we cannot understand what we are unless we understand it. The way in which the virus emerges and spreads, the way in which it threatens and confines our lives, is the product of the same times that make us what we are. Our interactions with animals, and with wild animals in particular, is what makes it possible. The virus spreads throughout the world at the speed of globalisation. It knows how to monopolise public attention like a top media expert. It has found out about our habits and physical proximity to each other in order to get to us more easily. It likes the polluted air with which we have infested our cities. It has learned drone techniques from us, humans, and is as stealthy and unpredictable as a drone wherever and whenever it chooses to attack. It behaves like the world's richest 1 per cent, an all-powerful master who bows to no state and knows no borders or ethical limits. It leaves laws and conventions to mortal humans who, thanks to its unwelcome presence, are now more mortal than before. It is as undemocratic as the society that permits such a great concentration of wealth. Contrary to the claims of much official discourse, its attacks are not indiscriminate. Its preferred targets are impoverished populations and the victims of famine, lack of medical care, poor living conditions, lack of workplace protection, and sexual or ethno-racial discrimination.

The virus is no less contemporary for being unwelcome. The monstrosity of that which we repel and the fear it arouses is as much our contemporary as the utopia with which we comfort ourselves and the hope it gives us. Contemporaneity is a heterogeneous totality, inherently uneven and composite. Viewing the virus as part of our contemporaneity means that if we wish to get rid of it, we will have to give up a part of what we find most seductive in the way we live. We will have to alter many of the practices, habits, loyalties and rewards to which we have become accustomed and which are so intimately linked to the recurrent emergence and growing lethality of the virus and its descendants. In other words, we will have to change the matrix of our contemporaneity, never losing sight of the fact that the people who suffer most from the dominant forms of this contemporaneity are also a part of it.

The hyper-contemporaneity of the new virus rests on a number of characteristics that strike me as especially engrossing. First of all, the new virus challenges our contemporaneity in such a profound way that we feel justified in viewing it as an abyssal mega-rift, a new kind of Berlin Wall. This new wall does not stand between two social and political systems but rather between two times – pre- and post-COVID. Whether the changes will be for the better or for the worse remains an open question, but there is no doubt that they will be significant. The brief end-of-history period appears to have come to an end. Second, the virus turns the present into a moving target consisting not only of what we can do or plan now, but also of the unpredictable things that may befall us. Thus, it poses a radical challenge to health insurance companies, for example. If we are heading towards a society where there will be more and more uninsurable risks, why is protection against insurable risks not the responsibility of the state, which is where we find protection whenever uninsurable risks strike anyway? Isn't it more efficient and fairer to pay taxes than insurance premiums? Third, the new virus dramatises the extent

to which our archaic past is part of our present, as argued by Pier Paolo Pasolini (2013) and now also by Giorgio Agamben (2020). This present-day past resides in our attraction to wild animals – a symbol of the unknown – for the appropriation and consumption or taming of that which we view as totally alien, and hence as much threatening as it is seductive. The present emerges as an anachronistic history from the times when animals were, by definition, wild, and therefore both unpredictable threats and much-desired trophies. The virus is a recycler, linking the present to distant pasts.

Finally, the coronavirus has exacerbated the apocalyptic drive (the present as the end of times) which has been gaining ground, namely with the growth of fundamentalist religions, whether Judeo-Christian, Islamic or political Hinduism. Apocalypticism is based on the notion that sooner or later a global catastrophe will end life on earth as we know it. In the case of religions, the exoteric knowledge underlying such a prediction is knowledge revealed by the deity's messengers. In some versions there will be a struggle between good and evil, and in the end only the faithful elect will be saved. However, apocalypticism also has a secular version, which takes the form of historical pessimism. At times moralistic, at times nostalgic for a pristine past, this pessimism is politically ambiguous, since it can take on either extreme-left tones (some forms of anarchism) or extreme-right tones (more common in recent times). It can be found in Dostoyevsky (1989), Nietzsche (1967), Artaud (1958) or Pasolini (2013).

The coronavirus invites the notion of a latent apocalypse, born not of revealed knowledge, but of symptoms that point towards increasingly extreme events. Added to this is the conviction that society, for all its protests about the need to correct its course, unfailingly ends up opting for the path of decay. The devastation caused by the coronavirus seems to portend an apocalypse in slow motion. The coronavirus feeds contemporaneity's pessimistic side, a fact that needs to be taken into account in the period immediately after the pandemic. Many people will prefer not to think about alternatives to a more virus-free world. They will wish a return to normality at all costs, since they believe that any change would only be for the worse. The narrative of fear must be counteracted by the narrative of hope. The clash between the two narratives is going to be decisive. The outcome will determine whether we want to continue to have the right to a better future or not.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Global South is not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of its populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimising such suffering.
- <sup>2</sup> See <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2020/nasa-model-reveals-how-much-covid-related-pollution-levels-deviated-from-the-norm> (Accessed: May 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, 'COVID-19, Authoritarianism vs. Democracy: What the Epidemic Reveals about the Orientalism of our Categories of Thought', <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/en/content/covid-19-authoritarianism-vs-democracy-what-epidemic-reveals-about-orientalism-our-categorie> (Accessed: April 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> See 'WHO report into COVID pandemic origins zeroes in on animal markets, not labs', *Nature*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00865-8> (Accessed: April 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> On the sociology of absences and emergences, see Santos (2014).



- <sup>6</sup> This concept, first operationalised by André Gide in 1893, describes narratives that contain other narratives inside them.
- <sup>7</sup> See ‘Visible Earth: The Blue Marble from Apollo 17’, <https://visibleearth.nasa.gov/images/55418/the-blue-marble-from-apollo-17> (Accessed: April 2021).
- <sup>8</sup> See <https://www.ft.com/content/0cea5e3f-d4c4-4ee2-961a-3aa150f388ec> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> See <http://theenemyishere.org/> (Accessed: 25 April 2020).
- <sup>10</sup> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.v, available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1130/1130.txt> (Accessed: 10 July 2020).

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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