

Pandemics, Politics, and Society



Critical Perspectives on the Covid-19 Crisis

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Frédéric Vandenberghe and Jean-François Véran

The Pandemic as a Global Social Total Fact

Epidemics occur when a contagious disease spreads rapidly to a large number of people in a given population in a short period of time. Epidemics turn into pandemics when the infectious disease is not contained and spreads through whole regions of the world. When contagion reaches all the continents (with the exception of the Antarctic) and potentially affects each and every person on earth – as is the case with the new coronavirus – the pandemic turns into a global pandemonium. Fear spreads through all ranks of society, emergency measures are taken, implemented and contested, everyday life is disrupted, and the social order unravels rapidly. While some people hope that the interdependence and mutual vulnerability of all will lead to a higher level of unity and consciousness, others fear the advent of the Hobbesian nightmare of a war of all against all, between individuals and groups, and at the international level.

The pandemic triggers an ‘omnicrisis’ (Negri and Hardt 2000: 189, 201), reinforcing pre-existing ecological, economic, political, social, cultural and personal strains, fusing them into an all-encompassing crisis of multiple institutions that takes on a humanitarian dimension and evokes dystopian scenarios that plunge us back, if not into the Middle Ages (the plague and the quarantine), then certainly to the bleakest days of the twentieth century – the First World War (and the 1918 flu), the economic downturn of 1928–29, and the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Europe and Asia.

The global outbreak brings whole societies over the edge, and possibly over it. The looming omnicrisis comes with a strong sense of decline, decay and collapse – as if we have seen nothing yet and the worst is still to come. From the point of view of the humanities and the social sciences, there is not just one virus, but multiple pathogens running at the same time through the population: neoliberalism, populism, post-truthism and the Anthropocene. Since the end of the 1970s, monetarism, free market ideologies and corporatist interests have spawned an economy that is increasingly untethered from democracy (‘post-democracy’). By increasing inequality and vulnerability among the masses, the liberal economy has triggered a populist backlash against the elites that has led to the authoritarianism of ‘illiberal democracies’. The resurgence of virulent nationalisms in many parts of the world has in turn strengthened anti-globalism, undermined cosmopolitanism and pulled the rug from multilateral agreements to control climate change and other ecological risks of the coming Anthropocene. With the political polarisation that splits the citizenry into antagonistic factions, one by one all limits of political decency have been transgressed. The pandemic

and lockdown fatigue have only radicalised the tensions. Post-truths, fake news, conspiracies and ‘epidemiologies’ have completely unhinged representations of reality from reality. As Baudrillard (1976) had anticipated, fact and fiction mingle and reality has turned into ‘hyperreality’. Everything happens as if the postmodernism of the 1980s has now come back with a vengeance. Not depoliticised, as with Baudrillard, but hyperpoliticised and combative.

Both authors of this chapter are European academics who have settled in Brazil and work at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. One is an anthropologist, the other a sociologist. During the Covid-19 emergency, one was in Rio, the other on a sabbatical in Paris. Together, we will analyse the processes of contagion and degeneration from two angles (social theory and applied anthropology) and two locations (Paris and Rio de Janeiro).

In Brazil, since the onset of the pandemic, one of us (FV) analysed the political situation (in weekly gatherings on Zoom) with a group of doctoral students (GRAF 2020). We have witnessed how the crisis has exacerbated the authoritarian tendencies of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro. Instead of confronting the virus head on, implementing and coordinating public health policies, he has doubled down on his historical and ecological revisionism with an open denial of scientific evidence. Not only does he negate two decades of military dictatorship in Brazil, which he conceives of as the apex of democracy, but he also denies the Amazon is on fire and he has seized the threat of Covid-19 as an opportunity to foment a military coup – as if it were still possible to return to the twentieth century.

In Paris, the other (J-FV) had, with *Médecins Sans Frontières*, embarked on operations during the two-month lockdown, aimed at delivering medical assistance to the most precarious populations (illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers, homeless, drug addicts, sex workers, etc.). The anthropologist-fieldworker was expected to conduct outreach activities to follow the fast-expanding frontiers of vulnerability during the weeks of lockdown, as resources, coping mechanisms and resilience were depleting, transforming the deserted streets into a disaster zone.

In this chapter, we adopt a neo-Maussian perspective on the pandemic and analyse it as a ‘global social total fact’. With Durkheim, we assume that it can be analysed not only as a biological, but also as social fact, i.e. as a complex of collective acts that impose themselves on individuals from without (*epi-demics*, literally, that which comes down from above onto the demos) and regulate their ways of thinking, feeling and acting. With Mauss, we will further assume that it is a total fact that affects all societies and all individuals (*pan-demics*, literally, that which affects all people) that has to be analysed in all its dimensions, from

the biological to the political, from the symbolic to the economic, from the aesthetic to the existential.

The Pandemic under the Sociological Macroscope

The spectacle of disarray and desolation is difficult to bear, both collectively and individually. However, when one is right in the eye of the storm, from a social scientific point of view, it is a boon. It offers a unique opportunity for analysis, diagnosis and therapeutics. It is the equivalent of a large-scale experiment in real time that reveals in all its clarity and with all its brutality how the whole of humanity, all societies, all groups and every individual are potentially affected by the coronavirus. The virus itself may be tiny and microscopic but its social effects are gigantic and, as it were, puts the whole of society under the ‘macroscope’. As happens in revolutionary times, structures, cultures and practices that were taken for granted now become conspicuous. The system unravels in relations, processes and events. Local events can have immediate repercussions on global structures, while global structures can immediately percolate down to the local level. Large-scale tendencies and long-term processes burst into the open and come to the surface. Notwithstanding a general sense of contingency and uncertainty, the social dynamics become readable when the conflicts between social groups become exacerbated and the social order undergoes a serious crash test.

The plague fractures populations from within, increasing tensions between rich and poor, black and white, nationals and immigrants, believers and sceptics. It also introduces at once the whole of humanity as a unit of analysis and diagnosis. Reverting to old philosophies of history that conceive humanity to be a single acting and suffering subject, humankind is brought in once again as a single species with a living biological substrate that is both unique and co-extensive to all individuals, yet also open to interference with other species. The causes of the pandemic are complex and, therefore, difficult to determine, almost *indécidable*, as Derrida would say. Not only do different sciences have different interpretations of, and explanations for, the phenomenon, but because they affect everybody epidemics also trigger psycho-social and socio-political epidemics. With the result that at the limit everybody also tends to come up with their own explanation and interpretation, diagnosis and critique. As a result, it is not clear whether one has to blame globalisation, the president of the United States or a bat in Wuhan.

Viral outbreaks occur when microorganisms are able to cross the species barrier when human societies open up to each other either by accident, warfare or regular social and economic intermixing, and when the ecosystem is troubled by human interference (Epstein 1995). Any approach to the pandemic has necessarily to take into account three dimensions: the processes of viral contagion, the response of individual organisms to the virus, and its repercussions on collective human behaviours in all spheres of life (religion, politics, the economy, etc.). While epidemiology deals with the distribution and the patterns of diffusion of the virus among populations, medical clinicians focus on the individual biological reaction to viral infection. The social sciences for their part investigate how individuals and collectives react and respond to the epidemiological and biomedical realities, discourses and practices. The three dimensions are obviously interrelated. One cannot analyse the Covid-19 crisis without taking into account the statistics of contagion (the number of infected people, the number of deaths, the curves, etc.), the health policies that are implemented (from social distancing and lockdown to masks, ventilators and vaccines) and the whole gamut of psychological, cultural, social and political actions and reactions to the havoc that comes with the collective attempts, and the failures, to bring the viral spread under control.

The Gift of Marcel Mauss

Although we fully recognise that the epidemiological and clinical dimensions have their autonomy, we think, however, that the social sciences need to investigate the social aspects of both the biological and the clinical reality. For the sake of the argument, as an exercise in social theorising coupled to a multi-sited ethnography, we adopt in this article the perspective of the Durkheimian School. We will conceive of the *anthropos* as a totality (*l'homme total*): a living being with a consciousness who is a member of society (Mauss 1989: 280–310, 329–330). As a bio-psychic and social entity that is part of a larger whole, the human being cannot be decomposed, but has to be taken in all its complexity: “Body, soul and society: everything here is mingled” (Mauss 1989: 303). We assume that the pandemic is a social fact and that even the biological, the medical and the scientific dimensions of the Sars-Covid-2 virus are susceptible to social analysis.

Drawing on one of Marcel Mauss’s most imaginative concepts, we analyse the pandemic as a global total social fact that affects all the people(s) on Earth and “brings the totality of society and its social institutions into movement” (Mauss 1989: 274) or, as is the case, to a standstill. We follow Mauss’s

lead and investigate the morphological, physiological and symbolic aspects of the outbreak of Covid-19, interweaving bodies, representations and practices in dialectical fashion. While the pandemic is observed nationally (like the World Cup and Olympic Games), we will draw out its global aspects – following the actors, narratives, discourses, policies and practices as they move through space, unify humanity, transform societies and fracture communities.

In his famous essay on the gift, Mauss (1989: 143–279) uncovers the moral foundations of gift exchange. By looking at how the gift weaves together various populations in circles of reciprocity (for example, with the Kula in Melanesia) or investigating how hierarchy is reproduced and reinforced in political tournaments of generosity (for instance, the North American potlatch), Mauss has most convincingly shown that the exchange of gifts is not just an economic phenomenon. If anything, its moral and political dimensions are preeminent (Caillé 2000). It is enough to violate the norms of reciprocity and to fail to honour one of the triple obligations ('to give, to accept and to return the gift') to put the community under tension. The gift is an operator of peace, but may also lead to war.

Of course, the virus is not a gift. If anything, it is a curse, but it is also a living cursor that interconnects groups and individuals into a single community of fate. Like the collars and shells of the Kula or the animal furs of the potlatch, it circulates freely within social relationships and brings into movement the whole of society, the totality of their members and their institutions. Because infection by Sars-Cov-2 requires physical and therefore social proximity, its epidemiology is the biological imprint of hyper-connected social networks. In the global era, the extensity, intensity, velocity and impact of the contagion has been aggravated by the economic interdependence of whole regions in a single commodity chain that connects industrial production in Wuhan with consumption in London, New York and São Paulo.

Pandemics are nothing new in the history of humankind. Humans have always been social beings and therefore have always contaminated each other. This plague is different however. As indicated by Gerard Delanty in the introduction to this volume, the current contagion is not the first one of modernity, but it is the 'big one' that epidemiologists have been expecting for decades. Although we are still officially living in the Holocene, everything indicates that the current plight is one that humanity inflicted on itself. More contagions will follow because they are the result of at least two centuries of intensive extractive industrialisation of the planet. If the current rate of deforestation of the Amazon forest continues, the next zoonosis may well come from Brazil.

If the essay on the gift exemplifies marvellously the concept of the global social total fact, its most elaborate theoretical systematisation is to be found in a more confidential text in which Marcel Mauss tries to reorganise the various sec-

tions of the *Année Sociologique*, the famous journal of the Durkheimian School. In ‘Divisions and Proportions of Divisions in Sociology’, Mauss (1969: 42–80) followed his uncle (Durkheim 1970: 136–159) and divided social phenomena into social morphology and social physiology. Social morphology refers to the material and quantifiable substratum of society, consisting of ‘men and things’, ‘masses and numbers’, ‘groups and their structures’ that can be graphically represented (geography) and statistically measured (demography). Physiology contains the elements that set it in motion (‘collective representations and social practices’). Starting from their material and morphological base, the analyst must systematically integrate the collective practices that make up societies and the symbolic representations that structure and orient them by linking them to the totality. In synthesis, the analyst must: “seek the acts under the representations and the representations under the acts, and under both, the groups” (Mauss 1969: 60).

Morphological Analysis

Morphological analysis studies the social group as a material phenomenon. It looks at the substrate of society – at bodies (human and animal) and things (temples, factories, hospitals, etc.) and studies how they form a mass, with volume and density, and how they are distributed in time and space. Let us start with the geographical aspect of the pandemic and follow its spread through time and space, using Facebook’s Timeline and Google’s Earth to underscore its direct connection to globalisation (Grésillon 2020). From a geographical and geopolitical perspective, the pandemic appears as a product of the systemic interconnection of industrial and commercial urban regions into a global network that can be analysed as a single network of interconnected nodes through which flows of people, goods, money, information, images, discourses, and now also viruses, circulate. In the information age, ‘networks constitute the new morphology of our societies’ (Castells 1996: 469).

Networks of contagion

To understand the spread of the contagion of the coronavirus from the province of Hubei, via Europe and the US, to almost each of the 500,000 villages of India, one only needs to introduce a microscopic virus into the network of flows of people and things, while scaling up the analysis to the global level, to see that the clusters of contagion explode first in the nodes of the network (gigantic pro-

duction poles, global cities, technological valleys, corridors of innovation) and then move from there via its spokes to its rims.

Although the hypothesis still needs to be confirmed, the pandemic is said to have originated in an exotic food market in Wuhan where a pangolin that had been infected by a bat transmitted it to a human sometime in late 2019. From Wuhan, it followed the merchandise and spread to China's business partners in the Far East (Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea) at the beginning of the year. On the 21st of February, the first cluster (not the first case) of contagion was detected in the economically most affluent region of Italy, so-called 'Third Italy' with its innovative industries and flexible specialisation. The scenes of mass transportation of coffins in Bergamo are unforgettable. By the beginning of March, it had spread to the rest of Europe.

Everywhere, the grammar of diffusion is the same: within every country, the economic hubs (Milan, Paris, London, Madrid) are the 'super-spreaders'. With the exception of Sweden, Lithuania and Hungary, all European countries put their populations in lockdown. By April, Covid-19 arrived in the USA. The hospitals of New York and Seattle collapsed. By May, the contagion was completely out of control in the USA, Russia and Brazil. The numbers are staggering. The images are heart breaking. By September, India had become the new epicentre of the outbreak while the rest of the world was bracing for a second wave.

By now, it is evident that the diffusion of the virus is a direct function of the intensity of human interactions. Human interactions are most intensive where economic and commercial activities are concentrated. A general deduction can then be drawn at three geographic scales: Geopolitically, contagion follows the routes of global commerce and migration. That explains why Africa, with the exception of North and South Africa, has been relatively spared so far. Nationally, it circulates in the urban conurbations, and from there, it keeps on spreading along the regional and local transport lines, with workers who were required to sustain 'essential' economic activities transmitting the virus while the majority of the population was under lockdown. This is how contagion reached the poor suburbs of all European capitals within a few weeks. In India, when the Modi government put the whole country on lockdown with hardly any advance warning, millions of poor workers went into 'reverse migration', walking in droves for days and nights, bringing the virus to their native villages.

Now that the 'trickle-down effects' are better understood, we can expect a systematic scaling down of contagion measures to regional local clusters targeting and controlling the smallest geographical unit of analysis. During the pandemic, social morphology was transformed at its very base: the pandemic has triggered a change in social density similar to a seasonal variation. Like the Inuit in summer, in an early study by Marcel Mauss (1989: 387–477) on the

rhythms of social life, the social relations that animate society were loosened and became sparser. As people fell back on their family units, with apartments and houses akin to the dispersed tents of the Inuit in summer time, social and psychic life slowed down significantly and societies worldwide went through a protracted ‘phase of languid and depressed sociality’ (Mauss 1989: 471). Had it not been for an uptake in phone calls and video conferences, life in hyper-connected societies would have shrunk down to the micro-local pockets of interaction that characterises societies with segmental differentiation.

The hyperconfined and the unconfined

Morphological analysis studies how individuals and groups are distributed over the territory. Drawing from human geography, Mauss stresses the importance of the spatial organisation of society and considers its limits, its transport channels, its density, the rural/urban contrast etc. as precious indicators of a given society’s morphology. Indeed, satellite observation of shipping activity in ports, cars parked at shopping centres or night-time lights in urban areas, has shown how the pandemic provoked a sudden change in the patterns of human activity. The ‘mass’ of societies became, as it were, ‘liquefied’ with the arrival of the coronavirus. In the beginning, the mass flowed along major traffic routes. To ward off the fear, many joined family in their homesteads. The images were reminiscent of Ebola when extended West African families gathered, bringing back their relatives from different countries. The global lockdown also provoked an urban exodus. To flee the crowds and the stale air, a process of ‘counter-urbanisation’ was unleashed with a surge of house prices in the suburbs as a result. Made jobless by strict lockdowns throughout the globe, the ‘wretched of the earth’ who had moved to cities for work, returned home spurring a massive ‘reverse migration’. In Asia as in Latin America, the interminable processions of families on foot and with hardly any luggage remind us of the war exodus of 1940 or, more recently, that of the Syrian refugees. And then, suddenly, social life came to a standstill and ‘froze’.

In many countries worldwide, the lockdown was decreed in the form of an injunction with almost immediate effect, applying to all in a rather undifferentiated manner. Soon a significant difference appeared between two parts of the population who had quite a different experience of the lockdown. Based on our fieldwork in applied anthropology with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Paris, we distinguished two distinct populations: the ‘unconfined’ (the ‘locked-out’) and the ‘hyper-confined’ (the ‘locked-down’) (Véran and Viot 2020).

During the lockdown (March 17 to May 11), the unconfined went into a paradoxical hyper-mobility. For the homeless, the street disappeared as a space of survival. The streets were suddenly empty and so were the rubbish bins. When the bars and restaurants closed, they lost access to leftovers. The toilets of McDonald's or the neighbourhood library also closed. The homeless had to be constantly on the move to survive: from a water access point to a point of food distribution. As the city centre became dangerous overnight, some walked all the way to the terminals 2E and 2F of the distant airport of Charles de Gaulle to find a secure place to sleep. When definite categories of activities were declared essential (pharmacies, supermarkets, etc.), the working class also started to move. The subways and buses coming and going from the popular suburbs to the urban centres never stopped. In Paris, the metro line 13 to Saint-Denis was extremely busy. With delivery services such as Uber-eats and Ifood, the überexploited were continuously transiting on their motorbikes and bicycles (sometimes rented). Since no one was going anywhere, they had to be everywhere. We found them in total burnout, close to panic attacks or feverishly fighting their symptoms of Covid-19 in the waiting lines of our mobile clinics.

The 'hyper-confined' for their part remained cloistered at home. Since March, they have been living in a goldfish bowl. The elderly, those with a medical condition of co-morbidity, the middle classes in their home office who order their food online, people trapped by fear and anxiety all remained sheltered at home, even after the easing of the sanitary measures. In many places of the world, the hyper-confined devoted themselves to an 8:00 PM ritual: they opened their windows and clapped hands in gratitude to the health and other front-line workers. After the lockdown, some hyper-confined people remained homebound, like those soldiers who spent years in a bunker after the end of the Second World War.

During the lockdown, the public space lost its anonymity. Without the protection of the crowds, it became a space of hyper-visibility and, therefore, also of overexposure. In a squat, MSF found 85 transsexual sex workers who had systematically avoided the street as a risk mitigation strategy against discrimination and violence. Similarly, many illegal migrants had retreated from the streets, revealing a cross logic of fear of contamination and of police harassment. In the name of safety, they had given up a decent diet and were not seeking medical help when they needed it. The outreach team also gave medical assistance to dozens of people living in tents in the heart of the Bois de Vincennes: to protect themselves from the virus, they had chosen to live like Robinsons, often with the price of renouncing care.

Physiological Analysis

In the old-fashioned language that Durkheim transposed from biology to sociology, ‘social morphology’ refers to the structure of society, while ‘social physiology’ refers to structures in movement, that is, to dynamic totalities. It includes both social representations and practices that are tied together in living institutions. Institutions are established ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are transmitted from generation to generation. The great contribution of Marcel Mauss is to have adapted and shifted the language away from Durkheim’s collective representations to symbolic representations of society (Tarot 1999). The symbolical is the great discovery of Marcel Mauss. It influenced the whole tradition of French structuralism and post-structuralism, from Benvéniste to Bourdieu, from Lévi-Strauss to Descola, from Lefort to Castoriadis and Gauchet. For Mauss, everything is significant, and everything signifies. As a consequence, the morphological substrate also takes on meaning, and everything and everyone are interrelated with everything and everyone else. “There is no social phenomenon that is not an integral part of the social whole” (Mauss 1969: 51). As all parts are interrelated in a totality, sociological analysis is always holistic. Thanks to symbolism, societies are able to project their unity and their division outside of themselves and these representations directly structure the social practices from within. Symbolic representations therefore not only represent, but by commanding acts, they also perform the collective: they bring it into existence and into movement.

Holism, individualism, co-immunism

When one analyses complex societies in a holistic fashion, one quickly comes to realize that their individualism is also a social product and a moral fact. The individual is sacred, as Durkheim (1970: 261–278) and Goffman (1967: 47–95) have amply shown, at the macro and micro levels of society respectively. The initial consensus established within the World Health Organization’s area of influence confirmed the principle of the sacredness of the individual. This explains why, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, individual health became the one principle that unified societies and led to international institutional convergence. Because each individual counts and survival is the highest value, only one course of action seemed possible: ‘flatten the curve’, don’t overburden hospitals, save lives.

Almost everywhere in the world, all institutions and all subsystems of society were brought under the imperative of health. Complex societies started to de-differentiate and returned to segmental differentiation: “Never before has our life been so simple and never again, after these few weeks are over, will it be that simple again” (Stichweh 2020: 9). The economy was no longer the dominant system. Utilitarianism was discarded and *homo economicus* was put back in his place. For a moment, politics were handed over to the experts (virologists, epidemiologists, even sociologists) who took crucial decisions based on science. Scientific research itself became monothematic. The news turned into a collective funeral. Sports and concerts, the equivalents of folklore, were suspended. So were the most elementary freedoms, including the right to come and go.

The curtailment of individual liberties was accepted because people become conscious of their interdependence. They knew that Covid-19 is a relational hazard and that to protect others they had to accept limitations to their own freedom. Breaking with the vision of independent individuals, modern individualism showed its holistic imprint. The *homo clausus* of economic and political liberalism, theorised by Norbert Elias (2001) in *The Society of Individuals*, opened up to fellow citizens. The knowledge that the newly infected became the new infectors linked individuals into a chain of transmission in which the weakest link inversely determines the force of the chain: as the weak links multiply, the force of contamination gets ever stronger. The pandemic showed that the individualism of modern societies is a moral and political one. Willingly relinquishing social contact to protect each other, moral individualism appeared as a form of ‘co-immunism’ (Sloterdijk 2011) that prolongs, but also inverts, Marcel Mauss’s convivialism (*Internationale conviviale*, 2020): individuals can only ‘live together with their differences’ and demonstrate their organic solidarity if they accept the rules of physical distance.

Epistemocrats and magico-populists

For a moment, there was a sense of interdependence and unity. However, after a couple of weeks of lockdown the unity quickly started to fracture. A period of what Victor Turner called ‘structural liminality’ opened up (Turner 1969): the old structures ceased to function and societies entered a protracted moment of ‘anti-structure’ in which old norms and conventions lost their sway and the new ones seemed both artificial and unnecessary. The social distancing had led to isolation, the isolation to atomism, and the atomism to anomie. Dark volcanic undercurrents came to the surface. The symbolic representations of unity were undercut by diabolic representations of division within the population.

Populist leaders pitted the scientific establishment and their elites against the common people who were afraid not only of losing their life, but also their livelihood and their jobs.

As always happens during epidemics, the outbreak of disease was doubled by a psycho-social contagion of fear and panic, ignorance and agitation that ripped through both isolated individuals and the social body, disrupting everyday practices, undermining faith in established authorities. With Philip Strong's model of an 'epidemic psychology', which tracks the "waves of individual and collective panic, outbursts of interpretation as to why disease has occurred, rushes of moral controversy, and plagues of competing control strategies" (Strong 1990: 257), Mauss's vision of a 'collective psychology', or, as he phrases it, a 'psychological sociology' (Mauss 1989: 289) took on a more sinister turn.

As 'sad passions' spread through society, dynamogenetic currents of negative effervescence progressively took hold on some parts of the population. At first, to conjure the panic, politicians and the people put their faith in science. Everywhere, 'scientific committees' were set up. Every country designated a prominent (male) epidemiologist, a great clinician, a 'knower', who became the face and voice of Reason. Politicians sought advice from the experts in their 'war against the virus'. Like their predecessors who had consulted the oracles before a fight, the politicians now entrusted their policies of public health to the scientific experts. They were the ones who had to devise and implement the most efficacious strategies to contain the viral contagion, through lockdown, contact tracing, testing, etc. In a frantic rush against the clock to develop the vaccine, exclusive contracts with the pharmaceutical industry were signed in haste.

Then came a six-syllable 'miracle': hydroxychloroquine. In his *Outline of a General Theory of Magic*, co-written with Henri Hubert, Mauss (1989: 1–141) had already analysed the magical substrate of miracle drugs, which they considered 'a real fabric of symbolism, sympathies, homeopathies and antipathies' (Mauss 1989: 12). With Didier Raoult, the French *bricoleur* in the white coat, the world discovered the magico-scientific superpower of symbolic enactment. With his oppositional style and his anti-establishment discourses, he re-enchanted medicine, replaced doubt by certainty, and instantly became a folk hero. Against the psycho-social contagion of fear, people were adhering to science-engineered hydroxychloroquine as a mimetic ritual conjuring of fear. And then the populists plugged into this energy and transformed it into a magico-political performance. Mauss knew that magic is a substitute for science and that it does not pass the test of truth. It is therefore not surprising that Bolsonaro and Trump, two major preachers of post-truthism, began to peddle hydroxychloroquine in the same way that in the past bonesetters would sell elixirs of youth. As one cannot prove that it is efficacious, one cannot disprove it either. It was produced en

masse by the military in Brazil and President Trump also sent to Brazil over 200 million doses.

The corona-scepticism of Jair Messias Bolsonaro

While most politicians were happy to coordinate the execution of public policies hiding behind the protective shield of their 'knowers', some autocrats and would-be dictators, like Alexander Lukashenko (Belarus), Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov (Turkmenistan), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), refused to take the virus seriously and systematically played down the risks. Here we will focus on Brazil and we will treat it as an extreme case – an 'ideal type' or, closer to the truth, a real dystopia – that shows in all brutality the real distortions of the populist politics of fear (Graf, 2021).

Giving priority to economic growth over health, Bolsonaro took the position that unemployment was worse than Covid-19 itself. Following Trump, he kept repeating 'the medicine is worse than the disease'. Since the beginning of the scourge, he has ignored safety measures, joined political rallies without mask and actively sabotaged social distancing. While other countries were locking down their populations, Bolsonaro wanted them to go back to work: 'Brazil cannot come to a halt'. The result of his irresponsibility became visible in the streets. Social distancing lasted only a couple of weeks. By mid-April, most businesses in Rio de Janeiro had reopened, at first hesitatingly behind half-closed doors, but then, under pressure from commerce and industry, officially and openly. Informal trade spilled over into the streets with ambulant vendors occupying the pavement. In the midst of the sanitary crisis, the president fired two of his ministers of health, who refused to sign off on hydroxychloroquine, only to replace them by an army general without medical experience, but with expertise in logistics. As soon as the general took over, the statistics started to be manipulated. Eventually, a private consortium formed by the main newspapers had to take over the production of reliable epidemiological data. As there's no longer any real health policy, every Brazilian citizen is now his or her own minister of health, deciding whether to wear a mask or go to the beach at the weekend.

In Brazil, corona-scepticism became the official position. The attack against science and the universities is a frontal one. Here, biopolitics and necropolitics are part of an ugly ideological war that is waged in the name of the religious truth itself and with support from the military against communism, science, education, culture, ecology and indigenous populations. The pandemic is unchecked, the Amazon forest is once again on fire, genocide against indigenous populations is taking place and, yet, nothing happens. With his insulting

speeches and his bad manners, Brazil's strongman is perceived as authentic. His followers call him the 'myth' and even though he destroys the country, he's cast in a messianic aura as the one who will save the country. He tells lies like a fascist and has even installed a propaganda cell in his presidential palace. In the midst of a pandemic, he created one political crisis after the other and even tried to foment a coup (Vandenberghe, 2020). He failed, at least for now. Thanks to the financial relief of 600 reais (100 euros) per month, he has actually increased his popularity. As part of the elites who voted him into power have changed their mind, he is now increasingly dependent on the poorest fractions of the population to support him

Rituals of the Blame Game

A rash of accusations invariably follows disasters. As Paul Farmer (2006) found in his study on AIDS in Haiti, which we will extend here to Covid-19, there are three ways to perpetrate an accusation: sorcery, moral condemnation, and conspiracy. Covid-19 is often read in popular religions as a divine punishment for sin that announces the end of times or as a curse that is attributed to witchcraft. To undo the spell, the formulas have multiplied. In the Philippines, volcanic ash was said to kill the virus. In parts of China, saltwater has been used. In India, it was cow dung and urine. In the US, bleach and UV light. Meanwhile, over 700 Iranians have died from drinking methanol, which they believed would cure the virus (Gusterson, 2020). Accusations are also built around an unstoppable moral argument. Responsibility for the contamination rests on each and every one of us. Social distancing must be respected. Masks must be worn all the time. Everyone is thus potentially responsible for the death of a family member or a friend. Individual consent to lockdown stems to a large extent from this devolution to individual behaviour of moral responsibility for the epidemic. Finally, by moving from the level of interpersonal relationships to that of social groups, the accusation of witchcraft turns into an accusation of conspiracy. The Chinese Communist Party contaminated the world, the virus is being spread through G5 networks, Bill Gates wants to insert microchips into vaccines, etc. These complex mechanisms of accusation are not to be understood here as cultural atavisms. They reflect an overall dysfunction of contemporary societies in addressing their people's basic needs and so they express the shifting balance of global power.

Conclusion

The pandemic is not a parenthesis. It is a transition point that indicates a rupture. In many parts of the world, the pandemic is already becoming an endemic disease. Its fluctuations and waves are difficult to understand, even for epidemiologists. Its repercussions on politics and society are unpredictable. We consider the pandemic a symptom of a global modernity that has gone awry. From a geological perspective, it may not be the ‘golden spike’ that opens the Anthropocene, tipping the scales from globalisation to planetarisation. Yet, we all sense that an epoch is coming to an end. We know that other pandemics are inevitable and that the sanitary crisis is only a harbinger of major structural, cultural and personal transformations. All signs point dangerously to another Great Transformation, similar to the one that Karl Polanyi talked about. Only now it is not the nineteenth century civilisation that has collapsed, as indicated in his famous opening line (Polanyi 1957: 3), but the twentieth century one.

In this chapter, we have investigated the pandemic as a global total social fact. To understand a social fact as a total fact implies (ideally) that one reveals the totality of social relations that constitute it. We have treated the Covid-19 crisis as a microscope of societal currents that come from the depths of society, may crystallize in social institutions (social physiology) and materialise in social structures (social morphology). With the Durkheimian School, we have analysed societies as ‘dynamic totalities’ that are continuously subject to ‘movements of structuration, destructuration and restructuration’ (Gurvitch 1967: 19). To capture the ambivalence and negativity of the present, we have shifted the analysis from a functionalist consensus theory to a more dialectical conflict theory.

From the material distribution and circulation of bodies and things (Durkheim’s ‘social structure’) via functions and dysfunctions of the economy, politics, law, etc. (the ‘institutions’) and via symbolic and diabolic representations (‘collective representations’), to creative and destructive currents (‘effervescences’), we have tried to capture the societal consequences of the pandemic in all its depth, complexity and volatility. As we are still in the midst of a period of liminality, this strange time between ‘separation’ (the ‘old world’) and ‘reintegration’ (the ‘new world’) when everything can shift for better or for worse, we are well advised to avoid conjectures about the future. We do not even know what will happen in three weeks’ time. With the horizon blocked, time itself seems to have warped.

Instead of global scenarios of the turbulent times of transition, we will finish on a more phenomenological note. Mauss did not hesitate to use his personal

experience in the trenches as a basis for understanding how ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss 1989: 383–386) adjusted to the context of war. Our own experience of trenchment has not been easy either. Like everyone else, we had difficulties adapting to the ‘new normal’. As we went into social distancing, we were breathing less, moving less and consuming less, while continuously tracking the latest news on our tablets. With a lot of anxiety, we had to move our classes on line and we learned new ways of suffering: while J-FV had frosted glass lesions in his lungs, FV went through the anguish of social disaffiliation. We were experiencing, perhaps, the inversion of Sartre’s formula: hell, after all, might be the absence of other people.

While we were experiencing the frailty of the human condition and rediscovering our humanism, the world of non-humans began to reclaim urban spaces: rabbits in the centre of Paris, wild boar in Barcelona, dolphins in Mediterranean ports. Meanwhile in Brazil, jaguars in the wetlands and forest trees in the indigenous territories of the Amazon were consumed by fires, lit by farmers, miners and other criminals who felt encouraged by Bolsonaro’s ruthless promotion of the extractive economy. The fauna and the flora would no doubt be better off without us. But if we, humans, are to survive we will have to expand our humanism to include social relationships with other species – including viruses and bacteria – and learn to live with them in the web of life.

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