

Viral Time

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When the pandemic goes viral, it is the possibility of the crowd that dissipates and without warning, is named the enemy. Precisely when community and mutual aid is necessary, the state intervenes to call for emergency, quarantine or, that rather Orwellian turn of phrase, *social distancing*. It is the foreshadowing of emergencies to come, not least of which is the ecological.

Public health has a long, troubled history in its relationship to democracy and equality in the emergency, for it functions not only on reason and science, but on the function of hierarchy and command when the crisis arrives.

While the political and journalistic rhetoric is that ‘we are all in this together’, people are physically asked to stand apart, at a distance, for the collective good. In a time of eroding government trust, the suspension of liberties, civic life and the conferring of new powers brings forward the crisis of duration where trust is on trial. The hollowed-out systems of public health, particularly the racket of the American privatized model, become overwhelmed and the choice of who receives care or who does not, is made at the triage of the frontline of the newly named crisis. The borders thicken.

The machines will breathe for us, but there’s a line-up and an adjudication of who matters.

Elias Canetti, in his work *Crowds and Power*, defines four features of the crowd – it always wants to grow, that within the crowd there is equality, the crowd loves density and, that the crowd needs direction. The current crisis asks us to re-examine the meaning of the crowd.

The experts who call for emergency move like a pack whose membership is decided and have the power to decree by command. In such times, a solidarity from below is necessary.

Writing of epidemics, in Ancient Greece, Thucydides wrote that, “People died like flies. The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets or flocking round the fountains in their desire for water.” Different than a natural disaster like an earthquake or a flood, people see the advance of death taking place before them by an unknown power.

When the force of the virus gives itself time in which to operate, it not only becomes power but it overtakes everything in its wake. It enters in to the realm of disaster. It is like a command that comes from outside and above, imposed upon community. As Canetti writes, “if we would master power we must face command openly and boldly, and search for means to deprive it of its sting.”

In an article about the various government measures to contain COVID 19, Giorgio Agamben, apart from regrettable comments, wrote that, “the emergency measures obligate us in fact to live in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in

every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us.”

All of its effects imply separations and regulations - spatial partitioning, endless inspections, the regulatory control of disciplinary order and policing of the self for the public good. The upending of government systems, capital flows, the redeploying of infrastructures and the pleas for military intervention in a mere passage of weeks bring with it an amped up drumbeat of war-like rhetorics and framings and uncritical talk of emergency powers for the greater good. ‘Close borders’ and ‘keep supply chains open’ is a cry and a demand. There is no crisis – stay calm is the message. We’ve got this.

The virus arrives both as an enemy from outside and within - an unforeseen invasion that arrives to name the crisis. It can operate as easily as the logic of the strongman, deployed for the protection of nation or for the public good, the elderly and the weak – the borderlines become blurry as the long apparatus of the state intervenes. The search for a hero narrative begins, particularly in the rugged individualism of the American psyche.

Foucault wrote that, “the exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream... Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion.”

The amnesias of the present day regarding the plagues of the past coincide with the reactionary, authoritarian populisms in circulation today. The plague is indeed the arrival of confusion and disorder and brings to the surface the very questions of sovereignty that are at stake today. As many have famously said, the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception. And the emergency has already arrived - stock up on toilet paper and liquor.

The virus does not discriminate or recognize borders, international treaties or care about the toxic origin stories of blood and soil – it is, by its very nature, an alien opportunist that arrives in the blindspot seeking total contamination, exposing the hollowed-out frailties and inequities of the state. As emergency powers appear and total mobilization in the guise of the public good arrives to *save us*, keeping one’s ear to the ground to listen to the present heartbeat of the normalized erosion of liberties enters in to the zone of responsibility. For what is left of the shadow of democracy, the emergency of contamination and hysteria has landed down and nested a little too easily. Funny money is being printed like it always has.

If there is a political task today, it is to recover the word *ma-fia* – its origins are not as a secret criminal society but a means to protect one’s family and loved ones from the injustice of government. From that archaeology derives the question, *in whom do you trust?*

