

Life and death in a pandemic

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Abstract

O scurtă retrospectivă a virusul COVID-19 care a cauzat actuala pandemie, a ciclului său de viață și a istoriei sale. Reacții, măsuri și efecte ale pandemiei COVID-19. O prezentare a diverselor abordări filosofice, cu accent pe filosofia morții, ecopsihanaliză, și apel la filosofii lui Sigmund Freud și Albert Camus.

Life and death in a pandemic

At the beginning of the crisis, the international media called China's strategy to combat coronavirus "tough", "extreme", "severe" and "controversial", stressing that it offered "no guarantee of success". (Qin, Myers, and Yu 2020) After the difficult experiences that other countries have gone through, " a crude and extreme version of the Chinese lockdown became the international norm." (Caduff 2020) Testing strategies differed from country to country and have changed in countries over time, and there was no agreement between experts and officials on what counts as death from the virus, this confusion influencing the data published by each country and making all comparisons in fact incomparable, creating "the sense of a major threat obscuring the differential nature of risk."

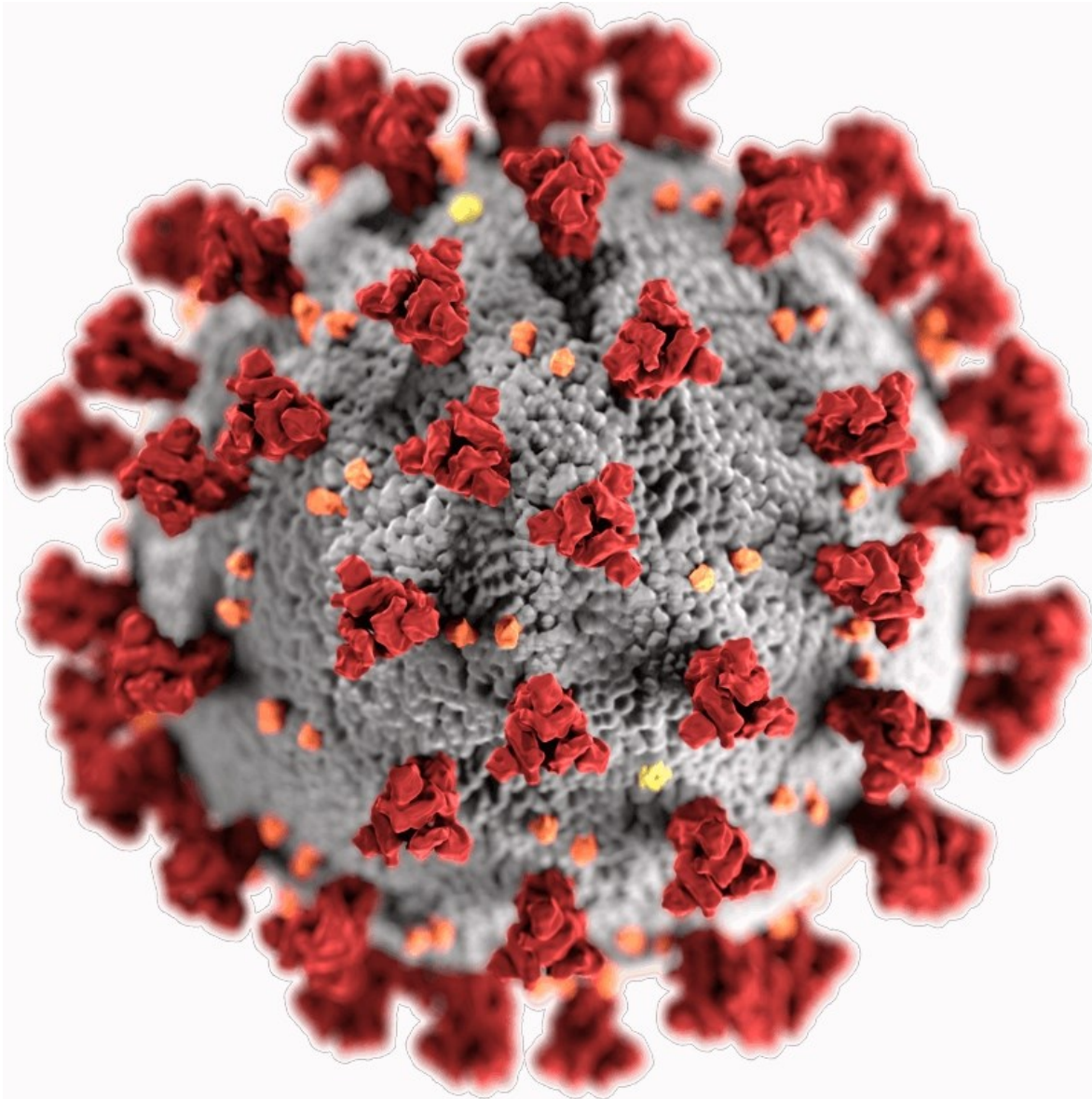
The lack of family doctors in rural areas and the low level of the public health system (Chrisafis 2019) have increased the pressure on hospitals in urban centers exceeding their capacity.

Caduff concludes that it is difficult to make predictions without the correct scientific methodologies, but "it is important to understand that the strategic combination of confusion, contradiction and the play of extreme opposites is foundational for authoritarian rule. Everything that instills a sense of disorder and that intensifies the crisis magnifies the desire for decisive action." (Caduff 2020)

Coronavirus is a RNA virus that causes infections of the respiratory tract of varying severity, from the common cold to lethal versions (SARS, MERS and COVID-19). The symptoms differ depending on the animal. For human coronavirus, there are still no vaccines or drugs to prevent or treat infections.

Coronavirus was discovered in the 1930s in domestic chickens. (Estola 1970) In the 1940s, two other animal coronaviruses were isolated. (McIntosh 1974) Human coronaviruses were discovered in the 1960s. (Kahn and McIntosh 2005) June Almeida, at St. Thomas Hospital in

London, visualized the coronavirus by electron microscopy in 1967, later highlighting the morphological links between them. (Almeida 2008)



(Illustration of the SARS-CoV-2 virion (Giaino 2020)

- Red protrusions: spike proteins
- Grey coating lipids, mainly
- Yellow: envelope proteins
- Orange: membrane proteins

In 2003, following the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Asia, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially named the respective SARS-CoV coronavirus. More

than 8,000 people were infected, about ten percent of whom died. (Li et al. 2005) A large number of human coronaviruses were subsequently identified, including HCoV NL63 in 2004, HCoV HKU1 in 2005, MERS-CoV in 2012, and SARS-CoV-2 in 2019. (Zhu et al. 2020)

A life cycle of a coronavirus includes

1. Cell entry (Simmons et al. 2013)
2. Genome translation: the RNA genome of the virus enters the cell cytoplasm acting as an RNA messenger. (Fehr and Perlman 2015)
3. Replication - transcription: nonstructural proteins coagulate to form a complex that replicates and transcribes RNA from an RNA strand. (Fehr and Perlman 2015) By replication the viral genome is reproduced, (Fehr and Perlman 2015) and by transcription the complex is capable of genetic recombination when at least two viral genomes are present in the same infected cell. (Payne 2017, 17) RNA recombination determines the genetic variability of coronavirus. (Su et al. 2016)
4. Assembly and release: Replicated positive genomic RNA becomes the genome of descending viruses. RNA transcription takes place inside the endoplasmic reticulum. Interactions between proteins lead to the assembly of viruses, which are then released from the host cell by exocytosis and can infect other host cells. (Fehr and Perlman 2015)
5. Transmission: Carriers of viruses can transmit them in the environment (Cui, Li, and Shi 2019) depending on the coronavirus species, by aerosol, fomite or fecal-oral route. (Decaro 2011a) SARS coronavirus is transmitted through aerosols. (Decaro 2011b)

It is estimated that the first coronavirus appeared relatively recently, approx. 8000 BC, although some models place it 55 million years ago, involving a long-term coevolution with bats and avian species. (Wertheim et al. 2013) Bats and birds, as warm-blooded flying vertebrates, are

an ideal natural reservoir for the coronavirus gene pool, allowing the evolution and extensive dissemination of coronaviruses. (Woo et al. 2012)

In December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia was reported in Wuhan, China (Board 2020) with a new strain of coronavirus (World Health Organization 2020d) named 2019-nCoV by the World Health Organization (WHO), (World Health Organization 2020b) then renamed SARS-CoV-2 by the International Committee on Virus Taxonomy. The virus has a 96% similarity to the bat's coronavirus. (Cohen 2020)

The World Health Organization has declared the outbreak of COVID-19 an urgent public health concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March. (World Health Organization 2020c) The pandemic has caused global social and economic disruption, the largest since the global recession triggered by the Great Depression, (IMFBlog 2020) and global famine that has affected 265 million people. (United Nations 2020)

Among the first reactions from the beginning of the pandemic was the search for culprits for its beginning and spread. This has exacerbated prejudice, xenophobia and racism towards people of Chinese descent (Burton 2020) and conspiracy theories. People in Italy (the first country in Europe to experience a severe outbreak of COVID-19) also suffered from suspicion and xenophobia. (Nadeau 2020) Discrimination against Muslims in India has also escalated after Indian authorities identified a gathering of an Islamic mission group as a source of pandemic. (Kolachalam 2020) In Paris, ethnic minorities complained of discriminatory police actions during quarantine. (Dodman 2020) In South Korea, the LGBTQ community has been blamed by some for the spread of the virus. (Thoreson 2020) Even in China, xenophobia and racism against non-residents, especially people of color, have increased during this period. (Asiedu 2020)

One of the most contested measures taken globally in the COVID-10 pandemic is social distancing (later called physical distancing to prevent the development of negative social associations). Methods of social distancing include quarantine; travel restrictions, closure of schools, workplaces, stadiums, theaters or shopping malls. (World Health Organization 2020a) Non-cooperation with distance measures in some areas has contributed to the further spread of the pandemic. Opposition to social distancing also came from some heterodox epidemiologists. (Farr 2020)

The pandemic has also affected political systems in several countries, leading to the suspension of legislative activities (Tumilty 2020) and the rescheduling of elections. (Corasaniti and Saul 2020)

The measures taken to combat the pandemic have allowed an unusually large expansion of government power, many sociologists are concerned that the state will hardly give up, after the mitigation of the pandemic, this power, there are many historical precedents in this regard.

In the opinion of Rocco Ronchi, (Foucault, Agamben, and Benvenuto 2020) the measures taken in the current pandemic confirm Foucault's thesis that the current power is biopolitical. He sees the virus as presenting the characteristic of an event, also possessing its "virtue" ("unlike simple facts, events possess a "virtue", a force, a property, a *vis*, that is, they do something"). The events are traumatic, producing transformations before taking place or even being possible. Thus, events generate the "real" possibility. It follows that the "virtue" of an event thus consists in making possible operational methods which "before" were simply impossible, unimaginable.

The philosopher Slavoj Zizek, in *Coronavirus is 'Kill Bill'-esque blow to capitalism and could lead to reinvention of communism (Op-Ed)*, states that "the coronavirus will also compel us

to re-invent communism based on trust in the people and in science”, against racism and the spread of new nationalisms. The virus would thus have dealt a severe blow to capitalism. (Zizek 2020)

Byung-Chul Han, in *La emergencia viral y el mundo de mañana*. Byung-Chul Han, *el filósofo surcoreano que piensa desde Berlín*, sees the individual as a possible active player who does not consider transformation to be safe. Human reason will have to defeat the virus. (Han 2020)

Giorgio Agamben, in *L'invenzione di un'epidemia*, argued that quarantine measures strengthen government mechanisms against individual freedoms. (Agamben 2020)

Jorge González Arocha, in *Philosophy, Social Death and the Necessary Ethical Turn After Covid-19*, discusses the social death and ethical transformation involved in the COVID-19 pandemic. A crisis of the way we live, but also of the way we die. (Gonzalez Arocha 2020) In the philosophy of death, against the current COVID-19 pandemic, Arocha distinguishes several chronological stages: the first stage was ignorance, almost denial, when the virus was seen only as something unlikely. Later, images of the dead began to appear, the death becoming real, with involved medically, sociologically and politically problems. An intermediate stage (especially in the USA) was the one that denies the true nature of the virus. Demonstrations and protests against quarantine followed, and the denial of the virus's effectiveness as a denial of the possibility of death. The situation we are in today reveals the weakness of the mechanisms built to hide real death. In the end, the economic crisis comes to be considered more important than any other existential crisis.

For the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dodds and Settemsdal use their own concept, ecopsychanalysis, a dialogue between psychoanalysis, science, philosophy, complexity theory, aesthetics and ecology, with a special emphasis on our relationship with the inhuman and climate

change. (Dodds 2020) Ecopsychanalysis considers the earth and the mind as intertwined, interconnected in a multitude of ensembles and developments. COVID-19 asks us to explore the strange ecology of nature that revolves around us and threatens to destroy us.

The virus gave us a chance to take a break and "rethink the runaway train of our civilization before it smashes into the ecological wall toward which it has been hurtling with accelerating speed, and shows how quickly society can actually change." Coronavirus, says Dodds, makes us all too aware of the problem of death, an obsession we try to get rid of as we follow the daily balance sheets of the dead and the exponential growth curves. (Dodds 2020) According to Freud in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*: (Freud 1964) "We showed an unmistakable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life. We tried to hush it up," an attitude towards death which "has a powerful effect on our lives. Life is impoverished, it loses in interest." Like war, pandemics sweep away the "conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it... Life has, indeed, become interesting again." War and pandemics, Dodds says, while inevitable, must be resisted. (Dodds 2020) But being forced to face death makes us feel alive even as we die. War, Freud continues, "strips us of the later accretions of civilization, and lays bare the primal man in each of us. It compels us once more to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death; it stamps strangers as enemies, whose death is to be brought about or desired; it tells us to disregard the death of those we love." For Camus too there can be no final victory against death: "the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good . . . the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city." (Freud 1964) (Dodds 2020)

Albert Camus also states that there can be no final victory against death: “the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good . . . the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.”

"Each of us has the plague within him . . . we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest, health, integrity, purity . . . is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter." (Camus 1972) (Dodds 2020)

The ecological strangeness of the coronavirus, says Dodds, gives us a chance to rethink what is really important, and the chance of a global culture. COVID-19 has led to the dramatic destabilization of the world's economic and social systems, with unpredictable and complex results. (Dodds 2020)

Freud acknowledged that solidarity in the face of a natural catastrophe is "one of the few gratifying and exalting impressions which mankind can offer." It is being tested today, when humanity is facing one of the greatest crises in its modern history. (Freud 1964) (Dodds 2020)

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