

“LIFE WITH THE VIRUS”

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF INFECTIOUS SOCIALITY

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Abstract

The article conceptualizes the specifics of experiencing time and reality under the COVID-19 pandemic. Its stakes are double: first, critique of objectivist evidences and the inertia of analogizing interpretations of events, in order to find a gaze toward the intercorporeal constitution of an unprecedented infectious sociality; second, revealing the possibilities of becoming Other not under the pressure of life circumstances, but in the borderline situation of anticipating the possibility of pandemic mass death. This is a

characteristic social form of death. In the light of the “rendezvous at death,” the ethical radicalization of life is a distinctive phenomenon of everyday life. It reveals life as risk and duty, it makes everyone be committed to choices, it makes societies discover the stakes of generative time (the time of simultaneous experiencing the non-simultaneity of lives) where the possibilities of caring for one another, but also of resistances against one another, are funded.

Key words: COVID-19, infectious sociality, intercorporeality, time interval in the social order, becoming Other.

»Življenje z virusom«. Fenomenologija nalezljive družbenosti

Povzetek

42 Članek konceptualizira specifično izkustva časa in resničnosti v pandemiji COVID-19. Njegov zastavek je dvojen: najprej, kritika objektivističnih razvidnosti in inercije analogizirajočih interpretacij dogodkov z namenom pridobitve pogleda, usmerjenega k interkorporealni konstituciji brezprimerne nalezljive družbenosti; nadalje, razprostrtje možnosti, kako postati Drugi, ne pod pritiskom življenjskih okoliščin, temveč znotraj mejne situacije anticipiranja možnosti pandemične množične smrti. To je značilna družbena oblika smrti. V luči »sestanka s smrtjo« etična radikalizacija življenja postane razlikovalni fenomen vsakdanjosti. Življenje razkriva kot rizik in dolžnost, vsakogar zavezuje k izbiram, družbe prisili k razgrinjanju zastavkov generativnega časa (časa simultanelega izkušanja nesimultanosti življenj), znotraj česar se utemeljujejo možnosti tako medsebojne skrbi kot odpora do drugega.

Ključne besede: COVID-19, nalezljiva družbenost, časovni interval znotraj družbenega reda, postajati Drugi.

As this text is a reflection on the time of pandemic, i.e., an attempt of revealing continuities and discontinuities in a flow, in which we are immersed, it must begin by stating the place and moment, in which one speaks. Here and now (Bulgaria, June 2020), one speaks of the “paradox of prevention” as defined by the following correlation: “the more successful the measures of the most acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis have been, the more they are criticized as being unnecessary.” Is there not a more profound underlying problem behind the debate on this, at first glance, merely functional correlation? That would be the problem of the many ways of challenging the reality of the pandemic, a way presenting it not as an insuperable self-evidence, but as a constant “reality check” and as a fragile balance in the clash of incommensurable “senses of reality”? In searching for answers to this unfading question, I would start with a phenomenological and psychoanalytic archaeology of the “unforgettable unrememberable.”¹ It requires the salvation of phenomena and attitudes of the most acute phase of the crisis because they do not disappear, they are repressed and they sink in the background behind or deep down, in order to free the forefront for their metamorphoses. Let us call them metamorphoses of an infectious sociality. Everyday language prefers to designate it euphemistically as “new normality” (instead of “new reality”) assuming “life with the virus.” We do not know

43

¹ On this paradoxical figure touched by a number of memory studies on the border of phenomenology and psychoanalysis, I will here refer to a formulation in Bernard Waldenfels’s responsive phenomenology: “The unforgettable is here not in a positive but in a fugitive form; it is more than what we can grasp and more than what we can remember. Here, we again come upon the enhanced form of a forgettance of forgetting. But that does not mean forgettance of what we have had or what we have been, it is a forgettance of that, *by which* we have been affected and *to which*, for better or worse, we will have to respond. [...] In every remembrance, in which the unrememberable lurks, we come upon a phenomenological mode of a covering memory [*Deckerinnerung*].” (Waldenfels 2012, 168)

how long we will live “in” it, what the ways will be of its daily routinization, or whether it is just a phase in the incubation of the “historical animal” that is in the course of being born, wrapped in the veil of the world that seems to remain the same. We should not forget how that animal has been conceived. Thus, the stake of my text is double: first, to criticize the objectivist self-evidences and the inertia of analogizing interpretations of events, in order to discover a gaze toward the intercorporeal constitution of an unprecedented infectious sociality; and second, to reveal the possibility of becoming Other not under the pressure of some circumstances of life, but in the borderline situation of anticipating the possibility of death, of pandemic mass death. This death is not just death pure and simple; it is a characteristic social form of death. The distinctive phenomenon of our present time, in my view, is the ethical radicalization of life that reveals life as a risk and a duty, and makes everyone be committed to their choices, making societies discover the stakes of generative time (the time of a simultaneous experiencing of the non-simultaneity of lives), in which the possibilities of caring for one another, but also resistances against one another, are funded.

44

1. The reflexive potential of infectious sociality

What is a pandemic? No doubt, it is a massive reality whose ensemble can be well described by what Michel Foucault calls a “dispositive”: a heterogeneous network of buildings, institutions, material resources, architectural arrangements, administrative measures, etc., emerging in response to a crisis situation; a network inscribed in relations of power, which it strives strategically to transform into a given direction (see Foucault 2003, 392–395). If we are ready to accept the vision of virologists that the instituting event of COVID-19, the viral transmission from wild animals to the human species—which was “expected”—, is not going to stop repeating itself, and if we are ready to believe in the general hypothesis of Galilean science that it is possible to calculate epidemic events by increasingly more complex mathematical models, i.e., “to rule over them by calculating” (in the sense of the Weberian “disenchantment of the world”), we could stay in an objectivist stance toward the dispositive of crisis, compare actual experience to past experience (SARS 1, MERS, SARS-

CoV-2...), and expect “the next time.” That is, expect the unrepeatable to repeat itself, by increasingly making the network more complex and encompassing more and more participants.

What, however, will determine our being able or not being able to cope, to live with the expectation of X? What—and Who—will the collective subject become, overrun by epidemic crises, but also by the “irreversible ecological mutation” (Latour 2020), and maintaining a definite relation with itself as able or unable to cope? Will this be “an Anthropocene humanity” with its supermodern science, technologies, and capitalism? Or a kind of de-globalized subject returning to nation-states having durability contests according to the maxim “bend without breaking,” seeking for isolationist advantages of their biopolitical bodies? Or will we live in a world of communities territorialized in an entirely new way, learning “to think like epidemiologists”? What the modes will be of (non-)belonging of every one to these communities, i.e., the modes of close and distant, of own and foreign? If we start from the basic principle of the responsive phenomenology that I am following—that the “subject” of a crisis becomes one only by the response it invents to what falls upon him, which presupposes a long “work of experience” (see Waldenfels 2015, 262–295; Waldenfels 2019, 163–165)—, we will hardly be able to say anything definite on these issues today. Its very formulation, however, refers to the possibilities to thematize what the objectivist approach to epidemics threatens to reduce, which I will—following the phenomenological perspective toward the unprecedented in the social world—formulate as two basic problematizations (which are also antinomies) shaping the frame of this text.

45

Pandemic as a time interval: life “with without” pause

The COVID-19 crisis, managed by quarantine politics, is a phenomenon in time—a caesura, an unprecedented factual pause in the meaning and action continuum of the world, and, simultaneously, an essentially temporal phenomenon that unfolds within itself with a horizon of indeterminacy and generates ceaseless modalizations of reality. The state of floating, time-unresistant reality that momentarily stands still by accents, can be

phenomenologically described as “mood” or “atmosphere”.² In the beginning of the pandemic as well as currently, moods are universally shared by “the magic of numbers” (Medarov 2020): the contagion spread curves, the expected peak and fall, the “hammer and dance,” the reproductive number, etc., simultaneously regulate anxiety and keep close the arrival of death. In both temporal aspects, the crisis is conjoined with an essentially non-identical “subject.” However, we may name it and to whatever degree everyone recognizes themselves in it, it is characterized by a certain degree of tolerance for the ambiguity of events, by a preparedness to accept the imperative nature of reality (social distancing!), and by that itself, preparedness to become Other (even if the *telos* of this becoming is “stay who you are”). The subjective differentiation of responses to the crises is in correlation not only with what we can, together with Pierre Bourdieu, call the “social area” of a person—i.e., the volume and structure of its objectively establishable “capitals” in a given conjuncture of the world (among which, in the first phase of social distancing, not only the means of maintenance and networks of care became evident, but also the spatial goods or shortages, such as having physical space, possibility of working from home, access to telemedicine, etc.; but we do not know what they will be in the future). In my view, it is also in correlation with a *definite configuration of identity*, which in the contemporary phenomenological psychopathology is called “centricity” or “over-identification,” and designates a degree of the established normative structure of the world with a pole of “hypernomy” (see Stanghellini 2004, 106). Did not the quarantine resemble a collective “melancholy crisis” dominated by the typical feelings of loss, emptiness, monotony, bodily inertness?

But how would becoming Other be possible if it is limited by what, under the circumstances of the big social closing, i.e., of the factual pause, became intrusively conspicuous as “the missing pause button,” in the words of the geneticist Georgi Marinov, in a world based on the systemic imperatives of

2 Atmospheres are not “psychisms,” they are mediums, elements that simultaneously surround, wrap, and penetrate us; they are a phenomenon of a contagious retreat from the world of practical action whenever that world, to use a variation of Heidegger’s analysis of boredom, leaves us in “the empty” of a long present time, but holds us “chained” to the rest of unfolded, undetermined possibilities (see Sabeva 2010, 151).

incessant growth and universal indebtedness (see Marinov 2020)? Are the systems of the societies of supermodern capitalism even compatible with the ethical imperatives of such a “life with the virus” that does not fetishize the pharmaceutical solutions of the elimination of pathogens? My considerations retain this social-critical horizon, but they transform it at the level of the work of experience and the fractalization of identity in the conditions of “the new normality.” The politics of the pandemic demonstrate in an unprecedented way how time interval is in the social order both possible *and* impossible, how the quasi-positive functioning of societies is possible in the conditions of dominating modalities of negativity (inabilities, prohibitions, refusals, abstinences, losses, denials, etc.), all of them perceived in the shadow of the big closing: a mode of life “with without” pause.³

Pandemic as an intercorporeal configuration

The universal medium of transmission of the contagion today, in the era of supermodernity, transforms social order not so much in the logic of the old quarantine as a “repertory of security” (see Wiegeshoff 2020), nor in the logic of a “state of exception” (see Agamben 2020), nor of the functional “simplification of the social” (see Stichweh 2020), which describe the forms of life and experience in reductive categories. It transforms it into infectious sociality that has its own measure irreducible to “biological life.” It requires a *radical reflexive relation* between the personally lived life, as *Leib*, and an anonymously lived life, as an organism, “rhizomatically” interwoven, Deleuze would say, with human and inhuman organisms, but also with the elemental, that which renders possible life itself (air, water, soil, etc.). This

47

³ I permit myself here to use the figure “with without,” by which Alenka Zupančič conveys especially visibly the psychoanalytic conception of negativity: “A man enters a restaurant and says to the waiter: ‘One coffee without cream, please.’ The waiter answers: ‘Sorry, Sir, we don’t have any cream. Can it be without milk?’ This joke has something of the real, and even a certain truth on the real, which is related precisely to its specific negativity, introduced or discovered by psychoanalysis. A negation of something that is not pure absence nor pure nothingness nor a mere complement of what is being denied. In the moment of its being spoken, there remains a trace of that which is not.” (Zupančič 2012)

relation could only function by elaborating a reflexive norm of embodiment. Today, everybody knows the specific meaning of this norm, which reads that one can avoid the threat of contagion only, if one incessantly appresents oneself as having a contagion (and acts as such). I.e., one doubles oneself not only as a lived *and* living body, but also as an ethically responsible *and* guilty subject. Some of those who have “met the virus,” but have remained “symptomless” know the guilty consciousness of how unequalitarian (unbrotherly) being contagious is: a mature woman who has survived COVID-19 without symptoms shares what it is like to have transmitted the disease to two of your younger surrounding people in a grave form. Thus, the formula of intercorporeality in infectious sociality is not “I protect myself,” but everybody else is protected by me: *my Self is not a center, but a medium.*

Is it not worth to deploy in greater depth the implications of this incorporated normativity or normative intercorporeality that strives to become “the new normality”?

48 This means to trace first the profound processes of sensory disintegration caused by the social distancing imperative both in the subjective sphere (insisting that the hand must retreat from the perceptible world, that the breath that makes masks humid must prevent dangerous inhalation, and that vision must appresent the movement of invisible aerosols) as well as in the intersubjective sphere (insisting that everybody else must be appresented as the dangerous Other and without the indication that comes from the most expressive zone of human intercorporeality—the face, half-hidden under the mask). Thus, the intentionality of the lived body loses its main quality of guaranteeing a certain transparency toward the world—i.e., that we reach “the things themselves,” “the Others themselves,” but also that we “are ourselves.” The Aristotelian term of *koiné aisthesis*, by which some contemporary phenomenologists prefer to designate the problem of sensory integration, claiming that this “common sense” is at the base of ontological security as the pole of the object, of the co-subject, as well as of the pre-reflexive self-awareness (Stanghellini 2004, 116), also hints at the political implication even of the sensory imperatives of the pandemic.⁴

4 The emphasis on sensory disintegration that I make in this context should not be

Would the elementary everyday reflexivity on such questions mean the birth of a “democratic” or “authentically political” biopolitics of everyday life, without this being a contradiction in the idea of politics of life (cf. Sotiris 2020)? This is the second social-critical problematization, from which I start. The interest in the peculiarities of the Swedish model, the debate on the social meaning of the so-called herd immunity, or the medical principle of triage, the sensitivity for losing the symbolic representations of death in a situation of quarantine, the grasping of the ambivalence of presupposed generational divides especially in the onset of the crisis, behind which the latent valorization stands of lives as “ungrievable” (because of having “concomitant diseases”) and “grievable,” and probably also many other not so widely discussed themes (e.g., how to compensate for our haptic impoverishment or how to motivate voluntary participation in the digital tracing of “contact chains”) have all, in my view, demonstrated the following: under the conditions of infectious sociality also, the actions by which we affirm ourselves as a center of spontaneity and initiative (in the spirit of Arendt’s understanding of the political), cannot be transformed without residue into uniform behaviors bearing witness to our biologically identical reactivity as “naked life.”

49

2. Contagion and atmosphere: phenomenological analytics

The epidemiological knowledge of the way of transmission of the contagion has an already rich history, which, however, still contains many enigmas, controversial points, and surprising news. If we leave aside for a moment the unclarified origin and the “zero event” of the contagion—the passing of SARS-CoV-2 from a bat to a human organism—, as well as the

hastily pathologized. It is possible that this ascesis of the senses works positive in the direction of a different intermodal synthesis of sensoriness and other kinesthetic habitualizations. They would be a part of the long time of a universal process that characterizes the passive syntheses of intentionality as *eco-intentionality*, as I called it some time ago (with a reference to Merleau-Ponty’s remark on the so-called intentionality of the environment—*Umweltintentionalität*), which characterizes every “physiological subject” (see Sabeva 2014, 176). This corresponds to some evolutionary-biological conceptions of the pandemic that see the natural way to tame the new coronavirus in the global establishment of the new hygienic and behavioral habits.

story of the strongly misleading recognition of its identity and virulence as a biological agent with their political consequences, then for us, the lay people of the planet, the knowledge of the way of infecting has a perpetual core. What are its phenomenological implications? Although it has primarily an instructive nature, focused on “how” rather than on “that” and “what,” this knowledge aims at making the protection from “meeting the virus” not only mentally conceivable, but also practically perceptible, by two basic *perceptive substitutions*—the spatial substitution, summed up in the imperative of social distancing, and the haptic substitution, summed up in the imperative of not touching oneself in the permeable zones (mouth, nose, eyes). The essence of the infection, however, is its being of “airborne-droplet” nature, i.e., of an atmospheric and atmospherized, i.e., climatically modulated character, combined with the shocking pathogenicity of the virus (a doctor of a COVID-19 ward spoke about the dead silence among her colleagues at the sight of the first X-ray images of affected lungs). The droplets coming on us from somebody coughing, sneezing, or simply speaking in front of us, and even more the aerosols that are inaccessible to the senses—neither seen nor olfactible, i.e., devoid of hyletic content—, are the ones that have an indeterminate virus load and unknown stability in the air and eventually on contaminated surfaces, they turn air—the medium of our life—into a medium of a mortal threat. Maybe everybody could revive the memory of a shocking experience, in which one has known this “for the first time” in an embodied way.⁵ In these ambivalent conditions, breathing stands out as a total vital kinesthesia that we can control only to a tiny degree, making us anticipate the vital effect of

5 To me, this was an experience “at the threshold” also quite literally: stepping into the office of a general practitioner in early March 2020, when I was left totally perplexed not only by her startling appearance with gloves, a protective helmet, and a mask I had never seen before, but most of all the container, from which she sprayed the space between us during the conversation; I did not yet know what an infection gap is. Regarding such “instituting” events of meaning (which Husserl calls *Urstiftung*), I will quote Waldenfels again, who also takes up motives from Merleau-Ponty: “The play between visible and invisible refers to a history of seeing. The first gaze, the first contact, the kindling of the first desire does not merely mean the ‘positing of a content,’ it is, rather, an *initiation*, the opening of a dimension, an instituting, a key event that does not just let us see something *other* in the world, but makes us see *in a different way*, in another light, and in another scenario the world, ourselves, and the others.” (Waldenfels 2012, 105)

suffocation and respectively artificial breathing as an extraordinary form of human mutual aid. Who has not felt “the pain in the chest” and “suffocation” during the quarantine? Thus, the transmission of the contagion comes out to be identical to the very processualization of living bodies as breathing and speaking. Unlike HIV, for instance, SARS-CoV-2 is not identity and selective (i.e., quasi-recognizable through a certain form of life of its carriers), but an indifferent and inclusive virus; contracting it, is not related to bodily practices and excretions marked by the sinful or the dirty, but to our very disposition in life conditions that are beyond our control. This makes the ecological turn in the medical crisis, which thematizes the *conditions* of our biological life, not simply as being one of its possible political uses, but as an inevitable meaning implication (even if we leave aside the factual discoverability of a dependence between the virus’s contagiousness and the pollution with fine dust particles). The ecological implications concern the conditions favoring not only the undiscoverable beginning of the interspecies transmission of the virus (the human intervention in the habitats of wild animals), but also the conditions of its replication that parasites over the basic forms of embodied freedom, by which we as human beings re-measure space (being more or less massively “always on the road” and always “meeting Others”). The formal equality of human community, reinstated by the pandemic, comes with a reverse sign—it is not us who posit ourselves as politically equal before the virus (cf. Raychev and Stoychev 2020), but the radically foreign, which is even not living, posits us as equal by its very being able to act upon us *as breathing beings*. It is not a protesting political community (like the one who in 1989, in the conditions of the crumbling communist regime in Bulgaria, rose against the gas pollution in Rousse) that says *Breathe!*, which means “fight for your right to life against the system”.⁶ It is the un-human that “says” *Breathe!*; and in the “fight for survival” between biological agents, the conatus of our corporeality that reveals to us through the virus is: “Breathe—in order to die.” By this way of expression, I am not making an anthropomorphic transfer nor a naturalization of intentionality. I am stressing the turn in the oriented constitution of the world in the following sense: in the situation of a crisis, the measure of understandability is given

51

6 I allude to the famous film under that title, of 1988, by director Yuri Jirov.

not by how we are mastering natural objects, but by how they—as “rebellious” and “reacting”—force us to responsively constitute ourselves in relation to the measure of our embodied freedom in a primordial sense—as *freedom of our vital kinestheses*. Amidst the climatic events that take place between the poles of heat and cold, floods and draughts, amidst the epidemic events that untangle the rhizomes of the living and the parasitizing living, we rediscover ourselves as a field of localized feelings of the meeting with the world. If one can speak of *ecological intentionality* that consists of practicing embodied freedom in this primordial sense, it is because “the absolute here” of my lived body (which I can neither leave nor move aside) only exists as grown together with a resting fundament (the earth as soil) and with the unobtrusive balance of the basic elements of life.⁷ *Gaia* is “reacting,” “non-dead,” we could say with Latour, but also with Merleau-Ponty, because the “elements,” into which also being itself and the imaginary itself belong, are not objects but “fields, soft being, non-thetical, being before being” in which the feeling is a part of the felt without coinciding with it, but just allows it to unfold as a gap of the world (see Merleau-Ponty 2000, 272).

52

Therefore, “infectiousness” phenomenologically means an affective transformation of our being-able before the face not of something in the world, but of our meeting with the world in its entirety. It is a specific mood or attunement that, the more mercilessly it makes us face our being-thrown in the world and the impossibility to reify the threat, the more it makes us *reject* the world. Withdrawal, escape, isolation, the aversive attitude to the others are not panic effects in the sense of psychopathology, but the very infectious sociality

⁷ The background of these motives are the phenomenological analyses of Klaus Held on the bodily location “between the earth and the sky as invariants of the natural life-world” (see Held 1998, 21–41). Thinking the “living earth” within the horizon of “ecollapse,” and hence as a stake of a non-classical critical theory, Deyan Deyanov, however, proposes us to historicize the limits of capitalism as well as these “invariant structures”: “There are no such phenomena as *the immobile earth, the sky, the ocean, the air, etc.*, in general, they are always the immobile earth, sky, ocean, air precisely of this or that surrounding life-world, they are *indigenous*, and historical at that, and they appear as freely variable only to the transcendental phenomenologist who always comes *post festum*—after the *Europeans* have discovered, Christianized, conquered, and modernized them; they have imputed mono-dimensionality onto them and, hence, imputed onto them also invariant structures.” (Deyanov 2014, 27)

par excellence, as far as it represents the grasping of possibility *as possibility* rather than the establishment of presence (hence, “the magic of numbers”). That is why the aesthesiological space of the pandemic in its most acute phase is re-dimensioned not to the degree of the threat (say, the park, the sidewalk, the shop, the pharmacy, the hospital), but on the mechanism of drive splitting into “inside” and “outside” in Freud’s sense, which refers to “the most archaic, oral drive impulses—I want to eat this or I want to spit it out... it must be within me or outside of me” (Freud 2006, 533).

I began by saying that the atmospheric nature of the contagion (in the physical sense that coincides with the affective atmospherization of the world) becomes accessible to us solely through perceptive substitutions: through spatial distance and haptic ascesis that must lead the aerosol pollution to being present. But it does not announce itself with the obviousness of a miasma or of a dust, of a hurricane or an aurora, i.e., it has no hyletic content—and, respectively, it does not provide an ontic security about our state of being threatened. But is there anything special in this substitution for us who have long become used to practical idealizations under the form of a pictorial or mathematical representation of the micro- and the macro-world? What is problematic is not even so much the fact that the physical space in the social world is obviously neither one of physics nor of geometry, and that the elementary contact is a practice of “territorializing”—i.e., of controlling the distance, getting closer or more apart—, which becomes situated, incorporated, and affectively charged. This is why infectious sociality, of course, is always in the plural, it is an infinite set of sensory entiretys unable of mathematical modelling. The more essential, in my view, is that the *koine aisthesis*, i.e., the intermodal synthesis of perception, decomposes in such a way that, both in its primary affective layer as well as in the super-constructed epistemic levels, infectious sociality turns into a field of what Merleau-Ponty calls “*perceptive belief*” with a decisive re-emphasizing of the fantastic element in this dialectic structure of ascertainability and inaccessibility:

Just because it is a belief, i.e., a belonging that is understood beyond proofs, not necessary, woven out of incredulity, at all times threatened by disbelief. Belief and incredulity are here so closely related that we

always find the one in the other and, in particular, we find a sprout of untruth in the truth: the conviction that I have of being included in the world through my gaze already promises me a world of phantasms if I leave my gaze to wander. To cover your eyes, in order not to see the danger, means, they say, to not believe in things, to believe only in the private world, but this is, rather, to believe that what it is for it is absolutely, that a world we have managed to see as safe is safe, this means to believe to the highest degree that our vision reaches the things themselves. (Merleau-Ponty 2000, 39)

54 The antinomies of perceptive belief based on regimes of communal belonging stand, in my view, at the basis of the intrusive division of lay people into alarmists, negationists, and balancers; but it is also the fundament of scientific controversies. In the pandemic world, *the way in which one necessarily lives* is by mixing up the perceived and the imagined, between potentiality and fiction, as well as by the insecure assumption that *one perceives* and *one thinks* of the same object. Whom and in what I should believe, who and what I will deny, whether the pandemic even exists or is it a mere media simulacrum—every next day is a question of affective coordination between my habitualities and the anonymously-universal infectious attunement or mood which dynamically changes its object investments. Between the four walls, we are not on “islands” existing as protected spaces, but between atmospheres that come toward us—from the aerosols we exchange as breathing creatures and from the worries, by which we care for or surveil one another; through the collective phantasms of forced breathing and the double fixation on the respiratory machines meant to save (or kill) medicalized bodies unnaturally connected to them (lying on the belly); to the atmosphere of death maintained on a daily basis by national and global statistics on the dead that have been criticized for not making the difference between “dying with COVID-19” and “dying from COVID-19.” In infectious sociality, however, one necessarily lives with the supreme self-evidence that can be endured only if it is repressed away into the social unconscious and euphemized by the so-called capacity of health systems: just like war and bombing, the epidemic means that we are amidst the possibility of death from which the “*the epoché* of everyday attitude” has been withdrawn (Schutz). Thus, “the fundamental anxiety that I know that I will die and I am afraid

to die” (Schutz), is the medium of life itself, lived every next day as *missing death*. “One of us can go, sister,” told me my 51-year-old brother as we discussed how we would take care of our mother. This is the time of the “rendezvous at death” (after Derrida’s phrase) for a simultaneous experience of the non-simultaneity of lives—and this self-evidence is such a part of the *conditio humana*, which cannot be removed by even the most precise statistics of the number of death cases. We witnessed, however, how risky and even unforgivable is to violate *in a public political way* the taboo on the expected death not as my death, but as *the death of others*—be it in the refined manner of Dr. Wolfgang Scheuble (who said that human dignity as an absolute value “does not exclude the fact that we must die”) or with the neurotic outburst of such a military surgeon from the field of medicine of catastrophes as General Mutafchiyski, the leader of the Bulgarian crisis team, who brutally predicted mass deaths. An Italian writer saw in the attitude to death a lack of sense of the tragic in the generations of today. This, I think, is a socio-analytic symptom that suggests that the legitimate affects, at least in the first phase of this crisis, should have been coordinated with the logic of biocapitalism: precisely because this capitalism polarizes the biological life not between life and death, but between *survival and life*, so that the modality of its practices is to *make* someone survive (calculating the epidemic time in the drive for medically-functional solutions) or to *let* them live.⁸ And one more socio-analytic symptom from the thanatopolitics of the pandemic, pointing to the same direction: the public stratification of death effectuated by introducing the division between death “with concomitant diseases” and death “with no concomitant diseases.” Because death in the era of biocapitalism is not simply death, it is always a social form of death based on a different index of symbolic (de-)valorization of lives—as being “grievable” or “ungrievable.”

55

3. Ways of becoming Other: instead of a conclusion

“When is this all going to end,” used to ask me almost every morning over the phone my mother whose everyday life does not allow for the absence of care on the part of her close ones. The factual global pause, i.e., the unprecedented series of social closings (following the Chinese model), was in fact a

⁸ By this thesis, I am actually reformulating the famous Foucauldian definition of biopower as being influential in the modality of “*making* someone live or *letting* them die.”

heterogeneous repertory of security and control evoked by the impossibility to find pharmaceutical solutions to the medical crisis. But if the quarantines of old were so long and as permeable or impermeable as the natural cycle of contagion would require, the COVID-19 quarantines postulated a calculable future: they were based on mathematical models of gaining biological time (keeping a flat curve of contagion) by taking into account institutional criteria of the so-called capacity of health systems. In this sense, the factual pause in the existing order was a “deal for future” (after the expression of Andrey Raychev). The different political-legal forms of the state of exception that legalized quarantines were far from that “absolute power” of handling the time of others that Pierre Bourdieu speaks about:

56

Absolute power consists in unpredictability; in denying others any rational anticipation, in leaving them in absolute uncertainty, and in not leaving them with any standpoints allowing them to foresee what is going to take place. [...] All-powerful is the one who does not wait, but makes others wait. (Bourdieu 2001, 293)

The problem, however, is that the pause is not only in time and is not only based on a calculable future that keeps its continuity with its past. It is also the deployment of its own time—of a long present without a future, whose indeterminacy ensues from that which, “with an unforeseen fury” (as it was called in the Bulgarian case), does not stop coming toward us, without being inscribed in the continuum of duration as a future in the course of fulfillment. The time of the pause is doubled. How the X falling on us is going to debilitate the usual course of the world, and by that also our being-able, is a matter of subjective dispositions, in which the pivotal role belongs to the *difference* in the *position of the possible*—i.e., the empty space of that unimaginable, of which we can only say that “it will have been”; respectively the different ways, in which we can wait.⁹

⁹ The problem of the time interval (the pause) in the functioning order is not to be confounded with the problem of taking a stance (affirmative or negative) toward

But what comes after passing through precisely this phase of infectious sociality? In my view, that will be: forms of deceleration that is not perceived as deceleration; forms of closing that is not perceived as closing; forms of reevaluation of the world of the close and the presence that is not perceived as a zone of control, but as a zone of fragility due to its membrane structure. The task of a phenomenologically sensitive socio-analysis would be to recognize the signs and symptoms in “testing” this new reality.

In his book *Is It Tomorrow Already? How the Pandemic Changes Europe* Ivan Krastev shares the important observation that there is no narrative of epidemics and, therefore, no collective memory of them (see Krastev 2020, 15–16). I would not entirely agree with him since things hinge on the understanding what collective memory is. A passive layer of that memory, it seems to me, is the *transgenerational imagined bodily* of pandemic, which is transmitted *leiblich*, by feeling-in (*Einführung*), into the “reasons to survive,” although the historical chain is interrupted, i.e., there are spared generations. It participates in our experience as co-constituting the measure of what it is to withstand, “bend without breaking.” This passive layer is key to the generative time of life, intersected by birth and death, and constituted by giving time, but also by giving lived corporeality. During the quarantine, some were reading Boccaccio and Camus, others asked themselves questions not only regarding the “Spanish flu,” but also what it was like during the blockade of Leningrad, of the bombing of Dresden, or Sofia, or how those Jews felt who for years survived hidden in the basements of the Nazi-occupied Europe. It seems to me that this *transgenerative synthesis of lived corporeality*—as one of the possible

57

this pause under the form of “refusal” that presupposes some “work” of desire. This is, however, what Bruno Latour seems to do when, in the spirit of a sociological enlightenment that calls for individual and group self-analysis, insists on refusal under the form of “barrier gestures” that would prevent the return to “the same”: “Thus, the most important now is to use this time of imposed isolation in order to *describe*, first everyone for themselves, then in a group, that, to which we are attached; that, from which we are ready to become *emancipated*, liberated; the chains that we are ready to reconstitute and those that, in our behavior, we are resolved to interrupt” (Latour 2020). In everyday perception, however, “pause” and “refusal” are indistinguishable. A makeup artist from the Sofia Cinema Center who has remained without a job, is asked the question: “How do you cope?” And she answers: “I just don’t. There are no film productions, no prom parties. And who wants to have makeup—people wear masks.”

forms of self-inheritance in the era of supermodernity—can be inscribed in the project of a post-Bourdieuian socio-analysis of self-inheritance, giving access to the question of What and Who becomes the “subject” of the crisis. Every analogizing apperception of what befalls us must be perceived as funded in the transgenerative synthesis of lived corporeality. It is open not only to the past, but also to the future by a “prospective empathy” (as, e.g., Habermas demonstrated in analyzing the *possible* suffering of those born by genetic programming in the conditions of a liberal eugenics),¹⁰ which makes it an alternative to the naturalistically-biotechnological projects of supermodernity and of the “drive of capital” (Marx) for biotechnologically gaining time.

Thus, there are two projects of “survival”—either to biologically preserve yourself by quarantine, vaccine, and cure in your here and now, or withstand in the measure of a transgenerative anticipation of what it means to be a human *from this Earth*.

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58

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10 More details on this interpretation see in Straub 2012, 123–140.

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59

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