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Pandemic Glossaries: On Lexical Contagions²

Abstract: Less a philologist's notebook of the covid-19 pandemic, this essay is a "linguistic investigation" of the pandemic glossaries that emerged and then ossified into etymological fossils. The aim is to attempt to "inoculate" our public language to what Orwell called "slovenliness of our language" and its "corruption" of our thinking. Every language is both a form of life and a world-view, and thus, the goal is to unmask what world-view is concealed in the seeming innocuousness of the words we use to refer to not only the virus that caused the pandemic, but also to the measures that we have either implemented or failed to implement in the face of this global health crisis. The essay engages words such as: social distancing, relief, stimulus, homeoffice,

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² This essay uses parts of a much shorter and early essay, but which I have revised and expanded: "Lexicon of a Pandemic: Language as a Virus" in Solstice Literary Magazine, April, 2020: available on line at: <https://solsticelitmag.org/blog/lexicon-of-a-pandemic-language-as-a-virus/>. This text grew over the last year and a half in part because the dynamics of the pandemic continued to unfold, and because I changed my mind or because I came to see something I had not before because of conversations with friends over this period of time. I want to thank Martin Woessner, Ramón del Castillo, Santiago Zabala, Thomas Schmidt, and colleagues in Germany and Italy with whom I had informal conversations about how people were talking about the pandemic in their respective countries and languages.

vaccine, anti-vaxxer, economic and financial time, vector, foreign, deep state, and other words that have become as ubiquitous but also mystifying and masking.

Keywords: pandemic, language, virus, inoculation, linguistic investigation, social distance, homeoffice

Pandemični besednjak: o leksikalnih okužbah

Povzetek: Čeprav ne ravno filologov zvezek o pandemiji Covid-19, je pričujoči esej vendarle »jezikovna raziskava« pandemičnega besednjaka, ki se je pojavil in nato okostenel v etimološke fosile. Cilj eseja je poskusiti »cepiti« naš javni jezik proti temu, kar je Orwell imenoval »zaspanost našega jezika« in »pokvarjenost« našega mišljenja. Vsak jezik je hkrati oblika življenja in pogled na svet, zato je cilj besedila razkriti, kakšni svetovni nazori se skrivajo v navidezni neškodljivosti besed, ki jih uporabljamo za označevanje ne le virusa, ki je povzročil pandemijo, temveč tudi za ukrepe, ki smo jih v tem svetovni zdravstveni krizi izvedli ali jih nismo izvedli. Esaj vsebuje besede, kot so: socialno distanciranje, pomoč, spodbuda, domača pisarna, cepivo, proti-cepilec, ekonomski in finančni čas, vektor, tuje, globoka država in druge besede, ki so postale tako vseprisotne, a tudi skrivnostne in prikrivajoče.

Ključne besede: pandemija, jezik, virus, cepljenje, jezikovna raziskava, socialna distanca, domača pisarna

Introduction

We will look back upon the glossary produced by the covid-19 Pandemic as fossils that bear witness to the massive shifts, fractures and fissures, but also follies, inanities, and inattentions in our social consciousness and the terrain of our sociality. Words such as 'shutdown,' 'social distance,' 'hybrid mode,' 'maskup,' 'home office,' but also 'green pass' (used in Italy to show that you were

either vaccinated or recently received a negative covid-19 test), ‘passe sanitaire’ (used in France to prove you have been vaccinated), ‘querdenken’ (used in Germany to refer to conspiracy theories and pandemic deniers), and ‘anti-vaxxers’ (used in the U.S. to refer to those who oppose the covid-19 vaccines and espouse conspiracy theories about their origins, purposes and efficacy), to mention only some, are part of a public and private lexicon that conceals as it reveals the ways in which the pandemic has challenged the ways we talk about what has happened, what is happening, how we failed or succeeded at addressing it. Language has its unconscious and words are the symptoms of repressions, traumas, and healing processes. Languages, as ordinary language philosophy, hermeneutics, and the theory of communication of language allow us to establish a tri-fold relation: to the objective, social, and subjective worlds. Languages thus have syntax, semantics, and pragmatics: how we put together statements about either states of affairs or subjective states; how we refer to “things in the world,” and in what context something acquires meaning or sense. As we now recognize thanks to the work of Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Apel, Habermas, Austin, Rorty, de Beauvoir, Irigaray, and many others, every language is simultaneously a “life world” and a *Weltanschauung*, a “world-view.” Every word is thus a window into a world.

In the following I will try to offer a psychoanalysis of our pandemic language. The following is not quite a philologist’s diary, in the tradition of Victor Klemperer, whose *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist’s Notebook* was certainly an inspiration, nor is it quite a celebration of language, in the tradition of Elias Canetti, whose *The Conscience of Words*, was also a source (Klemperer 1979). Instead, I aim to follow in the trails trod by George Orwell, Susan Sontag, and Judith

Butler, who have also engage in the analysis of language with a view to their impact on our political will, or how it obfuscates of our common goals and insinuates subordination to either strongman or technocrats. In this famous essay *Politics and the English Language* from 1946, Orwell wrote: “It [The English Language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thought are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language make it easier for us to have foolish thoughts,” and “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” (Orwell 2021). I would paraphrase this last sentence for our pandemic: ‘If politics corrupts language, language can also corrupt politics.’ This in fact did happened. What follows is an attempt to discern how the words in our pandemic glossaries corrupted our global health politics. In earlier iterations of this “linguistic investigations” I used the words lexicon and dictionary, as nouns to name a distinct linguistic species. I come to realize that we already have a “pandemic” language that is made up of its unique semantics and syntax. This language is infectious. It has contributed to the corruption of our public discourse and has given rise to what Orwell calls the “slovenliness of our language.” Thus, I like to think of these “linguistic investigations” as means toward a “linguistic inoculation.”

Before I begin, I need to signal another source for this project. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle provided us one of the most important definitions of what it means to be human, namely that we are “zoon politikon”—that we are political animals. Aristotle added some nuance to this definition when, in his *Politics*, he said that humans, in addition to being political animals, are also “zoon echon logon”—animals possessing language. To be a political animal means also to be an animal of language, one that possesses and is possessed by language. For Aristotle, language not only allows us to express what is pleasant or painful, but also, and most

importantly, what is advantageous or harmful, and thus, by extension, what is either just or unjust (*Politics*, Book 1, chapter 2, 1253a). Language is the very condition of the possibility of naming justice. It is the core of political existence.

By the same token, language may be the very condition for concealing, masking, and imposing injustice. Language may itself become a form of tyranny, or the way to sanction a tyrannical political system at least. This is what Orwell had in mind when he brought *1984* to a conclusion with an appendix: “The Principles of Newspeak,” one of the most powerful reflections on the political uses of language ever written. This may have been what William Burroughs also had in mind when wrote—or cut and pasted, in *The Ticket that Exploded*—“language is a virus from outer space.”³

A virus is a biological entity, but language itself can be infected by the virus of double speak, misinformation, and obfuscation. Language itself can become the vector of other viruses. Still, though language may be a virus that infects the mind and our public existence, it may also be a source of healing, of clarity, good air, articulation, and inoculation for our public mind, something that makes us civically resilient. In a relatively recent essay in the *New Yorker*, Paul Elie (2020), recalling Susan Sontag’s essay *Illness as Metaphor*, writes the following: “Rather than applying societal metaphors to illness, we’ve applied illness metaphors to society, stripping them of their malign associations in the process. It may be that our fondness for virus as a metaphor has made it difficult for us to see viruses as potentially dangerous, even lethal, biologi-

³ This line from Burroughs became the title of one of Laurie Anderson’s performances: “Language is a virus.” I saw one such performance in which Burroughs is himself on the stage speaking the lines in his inimitable raspy voice. For a performance, see a video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvOoR8mOoms>

cal phenomena. In turn, our disinclination to see viruses as literal may have kept us from insisting on and observing the standards and practices that would prevent their spread.” (Elie 2020) I disagree with the first sentence, for when we use the language of virus, or social sickness, in general, to talk about a social “pathology” we are precisely underscoring, not metaphorizing, its urgency and potential lethality. But I think that the sentences following are on point. It is for this reason that, in a pandemic, we have to be especially attentive to the language we use to talk about who dies, as a result of what causes. We must know what we are asked to do, or not to do. We thus need a glossary for this pandemic, so we can become reflexive of the ways we conceal, obfuscate, disguise, and mask the basic issues of justice, fairness, urgency, and collective sacrifice that a crisis of this magnitude is hurtling into our midst. These “linguistic investigations” are perhaps ways to begin to inoculate our language, make it “bullshit” resistant.

In the following, I will reflect on some of the key terms that are being circulated in the public sphere right now as part of the collective attempt to describe, decipher, and discuss the “global health crisis.”

Social Distancing

At first blush this may seem like an innocent and apropos way to talk about what we must do to “flatten the curve.” Yet, as we are discovering, this is also the biggest misnomer of what we are actually doing. We all have reached out to loved ones, whether distant or close. We have fired texts, emails, postcards, tweets, epistles; reaching out to friends, lovers, parents, sons, and daughters. We are in fact “socially de-distancing.” Though we are apart from each other, we have fallen back into the thickness, closeness, warmth, and proximity of our social existence. We are not “socially distancing,” but rather “physical distancing.” But the expression “social distancing” may be more

insidious and viral than we suspect: for what is the “social” exactly? Hospitals, public transportation, libraries, schools, unemployment benefits—everything that we call “social services.” When we use the expression “social distancing” we are already getting ready to accept that “social services,” may have to be suspended, abridged, re-directed to those more deserving or entitled to them. What does it mean to social distance if not to put a greater distance between everything that constitutes “social services” and the most marginalized communities who depend on them? In California, for example, the agricultural cornucopia of the United States, the migrant labor force is made up almost exclusively of “Latinos”—many of whom over the last several years have been criminalized, demeaned, and vilified. They are the ones picking the food that must be picked, the food on which we are all relying to stay healthy. Yet they are socially-distanced out of the political community: they are ineligible for any social services or financial aid. On top of this, they already do not use our public medical facilities.

Relief, Stimulus, Stabilization

These are terms that have been used to refer to the two trillion dollar package that Congress passed in order to deal with the “economic” effects of the pandemic. Stimulus and stabilization are perhaps the most egregious and even cynical ways to refer to what is turning into an economic depression worse than the 2008 financial collapse, and close to the depression that followed the 1929 Wall Street Crash. The unemployment rate has already reached proportions beyond anything we saw in 2008. You cannot “stimulate” or “stabilize” an economy that is essentially grinding to a halt. At the most, the “package” voted by Congress in the last week of March is a relief package. We should thus talk about “rescue” Instead. The money that will go to tax-filing Americans is a form of “relief” that

may allow them to get by during what seems like it will be many months of economic stasis. But what we really need is a “rescue package” that will provide, in addition to immediate relief, long-term support that will allow citizens and workers to re-store and re-start their lives at the other end of this pandemic. We will need another Marshall Plan to re-structure and revive our economy.

Economic and Financial Time

Economists and economic journalists have been taking about the uncoupling of economic time from financial time as a way to highlight the challenges of dealing with the economic consequences of this pandemic. The former refers to the time in which we are making, earning, saving money. The latter refers to the timelines of our debts or financial burdens: school loans, car payments, mortgages, small business loans, etc. We already knew that one of largest debts in our economy is the “school” debt that students have had to accrue over the last decades, as the costs of higher education have skyrocket. This is one of the reasons why Democratic presidential candidates, like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, made the “forgiving” or “canceling” of student debts a central plank of their campaigns. Here, too, the pandemic is making it all too evident, all too clear, why we need to address the school debt issue. It is crippling this generation of young adults and it will cripple the next one, too. But this is perhaps only one of the most striking disconnect between not having a job, for many months, and not being able to keep up with one’s debts. As useful and important as the coupling or uncoupling of these two terms—economic time and financial time—may be for helping us get a handle on the extent of the economic crises, something falls out of view when use them. Before there is economic or financial time, there is the time of life, what the Germans call *Lebenzeit*, or life-time. Our economic time is only

one part of our *living time* or the *time of living*: we don't live to work; we work to live, as the saying goes. There must always be life after work. For many—for children, for young adults, for parents, for all in fact—this pandemic also means that life has been put on hold. 2020 may turn out to be the year that life came to a stand-still. Many will talk about it as the “lost year.” Some universities, thinking ahead to the disruption this is causing for their faculty and students, have “stopped the tenure clock” for faculty who would have been going up for tenure in the near future. But that’s just one example. The pandemic has “stopped the clock” on just about every aspect of *living time*. There is yet another way to think of *Lebenzeit*, for which we have created an appropriate expression: *life expectancy*. Life is not a given. It is at most a horizon of expectability, of what we can count on, and how long we think we may be able to live, all things being equal. It is revealing that one of the indicators of the justice of a society is measured in numbers by its “life expectancy” rates: the more just the society, the higher its statistical life expectancy; the less just, the lower the life expectancy. Life-time is in fact life expectancy; it is the living expression of the justice of a polity.

Home/Office/Homeoffice

Home is the realm of privacy, intimacy, the family, of love and care; where we relax, rest, and replenish; where our attention is directed to our spouse, our children, our pets, our plants, our hobbies, and where we turn our minds to other things than work. The office is its anti-thesis; it is public, formal, full of rituals, chains of command, hierarchies, comic or tragic plots; it is impersonal and depersonalized (even when we are allowed to have pictures of our families on our desk); it has its own rhythms and demands all of our attention. In the office we attend to tasks that we don't fully grasp, which will be revised before we have fully comprehend or

memorized, or recognize as fleeting and soon futile. Home and office belong to two different spaces in the social geography of our modern lives. In fact, the geography of our modern technological lives was configured by the gerrymandering and zoning of our lives in terms of a topological division of labor: work, consumption, entertainment, transportation, and homes were relegated to different zones in space. The extreme of this gerrymandering of social geography is the suburb with its publically finance highway, the driveway, the two car garage, the white picket fence, and the strictly enforced racial zoning. This was not always so, and one can say that these topological division of social space is relatively recent, at most 150 years. It is with the rise of the high-rise building, the invention of elevators, the invention and introduction of the telephone and typewriter into work that the technification and severe separation of home and office achieved new heights. Not all work was office work, but all work was regulated from an office, with its bureaucracy (which incidentally, means the “rule of the bureau or desk”). Like all social geographies, however, the division between office and home is predicated on a political economy that plays tricks on our perceptions of what is private, public, or owned by large corporations. Corporate headquarters belong to a corporation, with its CEO, boards of investors and stockholders. The offices, and all in those offices, belong to the corporation: the typewriters, telephones, copiers, desks, faxes, etc. Our homes belong to us, at least nominally, insofar as we pay mortgages. Everything in our homes belongs to us. The car in the driveway belongs to us, and we pay for its insurance, upkeep, the tolls, and the gas we use to get to the office. When we don’t drive to work, we pay for the use of public transportation. We spend hours getting to work, and then hours to return home. The person who takes a job that requires such a commute

incurs the costs of the “commute”. The uncoupling and severing of work and home commits us to a political economy that shifts the costs of maintaining such a zoned and gerrymandered topology to ‘private’ persons and citizens. The extreme example of this shift of costs is the daily care of our families, which is shouldered predominantly, if not exclusively, by women.

Just as the introduction of the skyscraper, the typewriter, and the telephone revolutionized work, the introduction of high-speed internet, the portable computer, and the cell phone have catalyzed another revolution in work, with its own topological consequences on the social geography of work and home, and the implementation of another political economy. We can describe this new social geography as one in which the office colonized home, work has invaded our entire life, the boundaries between private and the public have blurred and eroded. The office is a panoptical space. The productivity of the office worker demanded their quasi-anonymous surveillance. Max Weber argued that modern work, with its protestant ethic, made each one of us a “monk” Today, speaking along with Michel Foucault, we can say that the modern office made each one of us a ‘warden.’ The relatively inexpensive laptop, cell phone, and widespread availability of the Internet mean that we can work 24/7 (Crary 2013). We can check emails on the cell phone, reply to some before we get to the office. We can do a lot of our work seating on the train, or if we car pool, in the backseat. Wherever we go, we have our cell phone, and thus the office has become a mobile panopticon. The blue light of cell phone screens radiates their vigilance, and the relentless beeping and vibrating of their tireless wakefulness have replaced the soothing beaconing of church bells. We have turned into insomniacs of work. We have become hostages to its surveillance. And we never leave work, and work never leaves us.

We now speak of the way the pandemic revealed deep fissures in our social fabric, along the lines of class, race, gender, school attainment. In light of what I have called here the social geography of economic-social-political existence, we can also say that the pandemic has made legible and unmasked the hidden cartographies of our political economies. As we went into lockdown (a term that has all kinds of nefarious connotations), and most public venues were shutdown, we were consigned and relegated to stay home. Some were lucky to be able to continue to work from home. Others, the so-called front-line and indispensable workers, whose work can't be performed in an office, had to continue to show up to work and expose themselves to the hazards of the virus. There are jobs and work that can neither be outsourced nor done from a portable office, such as making food, stacking the shelves of supermarkets, processing the poultry and meat, tending to the ill and those who have medical urgencies. Yet, what had been taking place slowly but ineluctably now became a *fait accompli*. Home and office that had been converging because of the colonization of private life by work suddenly became the home-office. We had to stop commuting, spending money on gas, tolls, parking, lunches at work; some even stop having to pay for dry cleaning, and the buying of our expensive office cloths. But at the same time, the costs of the internet, the computer, the camera, the headphones, the cell phone bill, etc, were shifted to our home budget. Whereas our employer gave us an office, with all of its accoutrements, now we provided our employer an office free of charge. We don't need to clock in, as now there is neither temporal nor spatial makers separating work from private life, office from home. The virus has provided us with a revealing radiography of our new panoptical topographies and their segregated and extractive political economies.

Vaccine/Antivaxxer

The expression that is most striking during our pandemic times is anti-vaxxer. Why resist, oppose and refuse vaccines? Why make a political and social movement through the resistance to a medical device that has proven to be one of the greatest discoveries and inventions in the history of humankind? A painful part of human history was and remains, the history of our struggle against viruses, pathogens, bacteria, plagues, and so on. Human history is epidemiological history. We have discovered and invented vaccines to treat Smallpox, Yellow Fever, Measles, Poliomyelitis, the seasonal Flu, Tetanus, Rabbits, etc. Yet, we still face many other unconquered or undomesticated viruses and maladies; for instance, Ebola, Spongiform Encephalopathies (otherwise known as Mad Cow Disease), and of course, HIV, and Cancer. We used to think that plagues and pandemics were punishments or curses from God. Vaccines allowed us to steal that thunder from the Gods and domesticate their necrological power. But, what is a vaccine? First and foremost, vaccines are both a discovery and an invention. We learned that being exposed to a mild form of a virus teaches our body to generate antibodies against that virus. Vaccines are a virological pedagogy of the body. They are also invented, because some of them use the latest biochemical and genetic technique to develop artificial substance that neutralize or attack viruses. Thus, vaccines are facts of science and technological devices. They are reliable and well tested as the planes, trains, and cars in which we ride. Vaccines are also expression of our political will. This means they are a political fact. Whether we decide to invest in the science that develops them, whether we mass-produce them, how, where, at what costs, and to whom are they delivered is a large part of what good government decides. Furthermore, because we live in a globalized world, health is no longer national, but global, and thus

vaccines have taken on this global character. One nation, one state, one city, one county cannot be inoculated alone because viruses do not discriminate. This has been made patently clear by this pandemic. Most importantly, vaccines are also ethical imperatives, both in a social and individual sense. Public health is part of the ethical face of a society. Whether we have access to potable water, whether our air is polluted, whether we allow children to drink and smoke, whether we label our foods, whether we allow smoking in crowded public spaces, and so many different ways our public health is watched over and secured, are all ethical dimensions of our expectation that our government will attend to our collective health. Today, we measure the public health of a society in terms of life expectancy. The justice of a society is also gauged in terms of the distribution of health, access to affordable health care, and healthy foods. Our outrage and disbelief when our government betrays these expectations is evidence of their fundamental character. Vaccines protect and secure our public health. But, they are key elements of distribute justice. Vaccines protect not only the healthy, but most importantly, the most vulnerable among us, the very young and the elderly. Most vaccines are given to children, and for a reason. The Polio vaccine, for instance, allowed us to eradicate a disease that disfigured, maimed and irrevocably marked the life of children. Vaccines also allow us to minimize taxing our health care system, thus allowing it to attend to those with urgent healthcare crisis. An ICU bed not taken by a Covid-19 patient is one that can be occupied by the patient with urgent medical needs. Vaccines are thus part of our individual ethical profiles. As ethical persons, we have duties towards others and towards ourselves. I have duties of beneficence, non-maleficence, equity and justice towards others. But I also have the duties of self-regard and self-respect towards myself. This is why the anti-vaxxer is both socially

perplexing and ethically disorienting. Does it mean they are anti-science, anti-medicine, anti-public health, and most insidiously, anti-ethics? Vaccines are part of our public ethical and justice profile. To refused and attack them is to besmirch that face.

Virus

The Oxford English Dictionary provides us with the following etymology of the term: “classical Latin *vīrus* poisonous secretion, venom, virulent or malignant quality (of disposition or speech), acrid juice or element in something (as affecting its taste or smell), secretion having medicinal or magical property, animal semen, in post-classical Latin also human semen (early 3rd cent. in Tertullian) < the same Indo-European base as Sanskrit *viśa* poison, Avestan *vīša* poison, ancient Greek *λόγος* poison. Compare Middle French, French *virus* (1478) in sense ‘substance which conceals an infectious agent’” This is a very revealing etymology: first, because in its most ancient uses the term refers to both a poisonous substance and a “disposition or speech,” i.e. a certain poisonous form or type of language and speech; second, because it refers to a secretion, whether vegetable or animal; and third, because it refers to semen, which, from another perspective, is the carrier of life. What is interesting is that in all these senses, virus indicates that we are the carrier and projector of viruses, not only because of our bodily effluvia, but also because of our rhetorical venom. Once again, as Burroughs reminded us, words are a form of poisonous effluvia.

Vector

This is the word we are using to track the spread of the corona virus. The Oxford English Dictionary, again, provides us with an illuminating etymology: “Latin *vector*, agent-noun < *vehĕre* to carry. So (in sense 1) Spanish *vector*.” Vector means, then, what carries.

In an epidemic, the vector carries the virus, and the virus has its vector. In mechanics, a vector became the visual representation of a line of force, movement, momentum, velocity, or acceleration, which is the reason why in astronomy we talk about the “radius vector.” This is the line of movement of an astronomical object, the description of a parabolic arc around a gravitational pivot. A vector traces the trajectory of displacement around a curvature in space, as Einstein showed. More precisely, a vector is a representation of force. Seen from this perspective, a virus is then a line of force with its own trajectory of propagation: a force of biology as well as physics. This returns us to the original meaning: to carry. We are the carriers—the line of force—of the virus. We project it. We are its line of propagation. Insofar as we are “zoon politikon,” we cannot but give more force to the virus. The virus traces the radial vector of our global social existence and, of course, our biological interdependence.

Foreign

This word has become key in the lexicon of authoritarian populism, at least since the first half of the Twentieth Century. In his amazing *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook* the philologist Victor Klemperer notes that: “*artfremd* [foreign, literally, “of strange genus or type”] was a pervasive, recurring, and signaling term of the language of the Nazis. Foreign was everything that ailed, sickened, depleted, or weighed down the German people. This was why the Jewish people were described as rats or vermin, as an infestation. As a virus. Racial nationalisms, xenophobic nativism, and anti-immigrant populism utilize similar rhetorical strategy today: everything that is deemed and labeled foreign is unhealthy, impure, virulent and ultimately. It is revolting and polluting. But as American historian William

Appleman Williams showed in his *Empire as a Way of Life*, this strategy of making foreign what is autochthonous is a way to sanction the vilification of alleged enemies and to legislate the acceptance of internal injustices (Williams, 1980). Viruses are not foreign. They are endemic to life. Arguably, the history of humanity is also a virological history, the history of our symbiosis with viruses. To be a living biological entity is to have learned to survive and co-exist with the DNA randomizers that viruses are. The virus that is rightly seen as a vector is also the one that demonstrates there are no foreign viruses. It show that there are no foreign bodies, which, all alone, serve as the carriers of virus. If instead of speaking of a theodicy—of god’s (in)justice as expressed in the form pandemic, which kills indiscriminately—we spoke of anthropodicy, of the justice of the being of the human, we might even say that we humans are the virus that is killing the planet. Such language puts us on the slippery slope of a misanthropic rhetoric, though. It would be better, I think, simply to remember that we are all impure. We are our viruses: our immunological systems of resistance, our learned and acquired immunity.

Disappear

This is probably one of most irresponsible words to use when referring to a pandemic, a global health crisis. Viruses do not disappear; they either mutate, killing the host and thus killing itself, or we develop antibodies or vaccines. Viruses are DNA bandits—they steal DNA, or dissimulate by taking over DNA bits. They use the host’s DNA as a cloaking system. In this sense, viruses are what we can call the “cunning of life,” to alter that wonderful expression of Hegel’s. To this extent, viruses are always with us. Life itself cannot eradicate them, nor can we humans make them disappear. What we can do is learn to manage them, or to use Aesopian language,

to co-exist with them. The idea that the virus will just “disappear” is the height of self-denial about the nature of pandemics and what kind of response this one demands.

Luck

This is possibly the second most irresponsible word to be using these days, or in the context of any global health crisis. Our trusted OED again: “The chance occurrence of situations or events either favorable or unfavorable to a person’s interests; the sum of chance events affecting (favorably or unfavorably) a person’s interests or circumstances; a person’s apparent tendency to have good or ill fortune.” We talk about “good” or “bad” luck with “respect” to chances, hazards, happenstance; to whatever is not in our control or within our power to determine; to what we cannot foresee. Lurking in the use of the term is a sense that some have better luck than others, because the stars have aligned in their favor, or because some divine being is guarding over their fate, like a guardian spirit or some beneficent angel. Luck thus insinuates some kind of privilege, some sense of invulnerability. It is bound up with the idea of being a chosen one. But a virus does not discriminate on the basis of nationality, race, class, gender, of faith. This does not mean that viruses carry the vector of their lethality with the same degree of force and efficacy equally and indiscriminately. Those who have the means to “isolate” themselves, or have access to the right medical services, will be able to cope, to survive, and perhaps even develop resistance to the virus. Surviving a pandemic is not like winning the lottery. It is more like having been the beneficiary of a robust, accessible, and affordable public healthcare system. Most importantly, public health, as we have learned from the many epidemics, influenzas, and pandemics we have lived through, is a matter of social solidarity and

social justice. We may thus say: public health is the public face of social justice, i.e. public health is health justice. It is not luck.

Deep State

This is a term that surely belongs in Orwell's grammar of "Newspeak." The connotation is that there is a hidden, secret, burrowed, illegitimate, undemocratic state that thwarts, undermines, disrupts, and aims to discredit the "open," "real," "honest," "sincere," "overt," "public" state. It also has the connotation that what is being challenged, called into question, is the "real state." Thus, when someone invokes the dog whistle language of the "deep state," they are also thundering: "L'état c'est moi"—The state, that is me. Or, more directly, I am the state. Fortunately, in English at least, we have ways to undue this grammar of deligitimation and usurpation. We have the useful terms government, administration, and government powers. When the "Founding Fathers" drafted the Constitution, they specifically used the language of "Union," "Powers," the "granting" or "delegation" of powers, and "representatives." It is a constitution of "States," where each state, meaning a specific member of the Union, has its own constitution. In the United States Constitution, arguably, the term "state" appears only as something to be deconstructed. The Constitution of the United States constituted a government, not a state. States are either inherited or bequeathed, as in the "Right of Kings." To the "State" belongs an entire political iconology, complete with pageantry and semiological seducements. But a "government" is not, and cannot be, an icon or an image, because it is an ever shifting, revolving, staggered set of peoples performing and executing different powers. A "government" speaks with the many voices of reason, science, and, above all, public deliberation. A government has no king, and a president is only one of the powers that must be checked by the other pow-

ers. True democracies have no “state.” What they have are governments and elected “administrations,” that may work hard to use the government for their ideological ends. Towards the end of his “Appendix” to *1984*, Orwell, the philologist of Newspeak, explains how Old English had transformed into Newspeak. He quotes the U.S. Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments [note, not a state] are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government...[in italics, as quoted by Orwell]

But to this, our philologist of Newspeak adds: “It would have been quite impossible to render this into Newspeak while keeping to the sense of the original. The nearest one could come along to doing so would be to swallow the whole passage up in the single word *crimethink*. A full translation could only be an ideological translation, where by Jefferson’s words would be changed into a panegyric on absolute government.” It is exactly this “panegyric” on absolute government that the expression “deep state” invokes, but in reverse, which is why it is so similar to totalitarian language. It is language we should excise from our public deliberations.

Solidarity

There is a stark contrast between the language public officials in the US and in Europe are using to talk about this pandemic. Among many, many other contrasts, one of the most telling is

the absence of the language of “solidarity” from the pronouncements of US officials. Europeans (Germans in particular) are repeatedly and emphatically referring to “social solidarity,” and “solidarity” more generally (see Chancellor Merkel’s speech from March 18, 2020). Checking our reliable OED, we find the following definition for solidarity: “The fact or quality, on the part of communities, etc., of being perfectly united or at one in some respect, esp. in interests, sympathies, or aspirations; *spec.* with reference to the aspirations or actions of trade-union members. Also *attributive* and in other combinations.” Solidarity is either a “fact” or a “quality.” As a fact, solidarity means that the interests, aspirations—in general, the well being of others—is a primary interest and concern. As a quality, solidarity is a virtue, i.e. a way in which publics behave towards their members. A democracy, one might say, represents the extension of solidarity to each and every member of the polity, regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Solidarity is democratic love. Your interests will be my interests; my interests will be your interests. We shall share burdens and benefits. Where there are undue or mal-distributed burdens, we will make every effort to shoulder them together. In an essay from the early nineties, titled, most appropriately, *Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning ‘Stage 6’* Jürgen Habermas set out to show that universalism is not antithetical to social solidarity (Habermas 1990). Both are indispensable, he pointed out, for the pursuit of democratic equality and justice. Blind justice is guided by solidarity: it may not see, but it is impartially concerned for the well being of each who stands before it to make her or his claims. There is a beautiful sentence in the essay that eloquently describes the entwinement of solidarity and justice: “every requirement of universalization must remain

powerless unless there also arises, from membership in an ideal communication community, a consciousness of irrevocable solidarity, the certainty of *intimate relatedness in a shared life context*" (my italics). I would interpret this sentence, given our present "shared life context," in the following way: every justice claim, every claim to fairness, remains silent unless it is given voice—and ears to hear—by the expectation that we are the agents and benefactors of "irrevocable solidarity," that we share in an "intimate social relatedness." This pandemic is making all too evident how much we belong to a "community of life," to use Enrique Dussel's beautiful expression, in which we have a claim to justice as well as to solidarity. One cannot exist without the other. Solidarity and Justice are the highest virtues of a democracy. A pandemic is surely the most extreme challenge to our democratic virtuousness and healthcare institutions. Let us attend not only to what language we speak, but also to what we wittingly or unwittingly say with it. Let us not forget to whom, for whom, and for what public good we are speaking.

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