

## Richard B. Keys | Viral Subjects

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### Nature Is More Atrocious

The virus embodies a particular face of nature, one that is at once representative of the radical contingency of evolution and nature as such, and at the same time embodies the fundamental entanglement of both life and death.<sup>1</sup> Its blind drive to life and the incidental death of its hosts betrays a fundamental lack of evolutionary telos or purpose to nature. If the virus can be said to be intelligent, it is only in terms of an alien swarm intelligence that is unthinkable to the human, only to be glimpsed in the intersection of the statistical modelling of its spread and in the sickness, horror, and grief of its victims and their loved ones. As the virus infects its hosts and multiplies within their cells it affects its victims in an indeterminate manner, some remain asymptomatic or have only mild symptoms while others become gravely ill or die. In the spread and multiplication of the virus we see the contingency of the evolutionary process on display, an interplay of random mutation and environmental entrainment - from its first encounter with a receptive human host in Wuhan, to its continued spread around the world.

While Freud's notion of the drives - the life drive of Eros and the death drive of Thanatos - seems like a useful heuristic to understand

<sup>1</sup> For rhetorical effect I refer to SARS-CoV-2 as "the virus" throughout.

this interplay of the virus and human, of life and death, Freud's conception of the drives was ultimately a dualist one. It may be that it is only when the drives are considered within the context of a general economy (or ecology) beyond the psychology of the individual subject and human sociality, as they are in the work of the thinker of death and exchange par excellence, Georges Bataille, that their dynamic interplay becomes apparent. To quote Bataille:

Death might seem to be the complete opposite of a function whose purpose is birth... but we shall see further on that this opposition is reducible, and that the death of some is correlative with the birth of others, of which it is finally the precondition and the announcement.<sup>2</sup>

There is of course no malice in the will to life of the virus, no ill intention towards its human host. In fact, there is no intention at all, as the life drive of the virus is blind - a fact that makes it all the more horrific. Instead, this dance of life and death, virus and human, is simply a matter of chance; from the random process of mutation that produced the virus - including, notably, the virus's unique "protein spike" and its affinity with the ACE2 receptor protein - to the play of viral reproduction and random infection as it spreads among the population at large. In this interplay of random mutation and environmentally entrained adaptation we see a glimpse of the broader contingency and arbitrariness of nature. The pandemic, in this sense, is a global catastrophe prefaced on a single random mutation.

The lack of agency, or intelligence driving this random process of mutation, serves as a reminder that nature does not conform to human notions of justice and the good.<sup>3</sup> The virus embodies this fundamental inhuman dimension of nature, as in its drive to life and the incidental death of its hosts. It cannot be recuperated into human conceptions of beauty, truth, and justice, or for that matter evolutionary or historical necessity. The virus provides us with a glimpse of a wholly other face of the natural world, a hidden and horrific

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, "Death," trans. by Robert Hurley, in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 242.

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas Moynihan, "Existential Risk and Human Extinction: An Intellectual History," *Futures: The Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies*, Vol. 116 (February 2020): 102495. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102495>.

mask, that largely remains unseen to us. A nature punctuated by arbitrariness, contingency, rupture, and catastrophe, as much as any sense of evolutionary purpose or tendency toward homeostasis. A virulent and alien form of life that operates on a level that is essentially unthinkable to the human subject, given that our mode of intelligence and sensibility is so far removed from the random evolutionary thrust of mutation, infection, and incidental death that characterizes the viruses' mode of being. It seems pertinent here to point out that, strangely, most virologists consider viruses to be non-living, a designation that sees them occupy a liminal position between scientific conceptions of biological life and non-living organic matter.

### The Host

There is something uncanny about the act of infection, of how the virus takes over the body of its hosts, temporarily reconfiguring their biology in order to reproduce. Viruses, of course, function by repurposing the host's cellular machinery, in order to produce the RNA and proteins they need to reproduce themselves. In the case of COVID-19 the impacts on the host from this temporary act of possession vary widely from case to case, each representing a particular interaction between a novel virus with the unique physiology of its human host. While age, underlying chronic disease, and other factors obviously mediate the effect of the virus on their host, there is a degree to which the interaction of the novel virus with its host is random, as even the young and healthy can succumb to it. The virus casts off its individual hosts with total indifference, to it they are only temporary shells, as its *Umwelt* or milieu is rather the human species as a whole, an environment woven from receptive cells distributed across an aggregate population of individual bodies.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps even more uncanny are the cases that remain asymptomatic, which recent research suggests is many more than initially thought. The asymptomatic host is in a sense the perfect one, as they carry it unaware, spreading it through intimate social contact, or gestures as banal and innocent as touching their face and then a surface in a public space.

In the current state of exception that is the pandemic, the virus re-organizes the subjectivity of not only those who become infected

with it but also those that remain uninfected. We become orientated towards the virus in the negative as we seek to avoid infection, occupied by a mode of being that is characterized by the immunological - as we become viral subjects. In line with the directives of our governments, we wash and sanitize our hands, becoming increasingly conscious of what and who we interact with, even attempting to intervene in and prevent our own autonomic gestures such as touching our face. These immunological acts of cleanliness take on an almost religious fervor, as we repeat them superstitiously in the hope that they will prevent us from infection - reducing a risk that can be hedged but never fully eliminated. As Freud observed, such repetitive acts of ritual purification are seen not only in religious ritual but also in the behaviors of the obsessional-neurotic as they try to impose order on the contingency of the external world.<sup>5</sup> Freud's famous example of such obsessional behavior from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* comes to mind, where a small child sublimates their frustration with their inability to control the appearance or disappearance of their mother onto a toy, which they make disappear and reappear to their satisfaction - *fort-da*.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, the child produces the illusion of control over an incomprehensible and indeterminate world that is embodied in the figure of the mother, who at that age constitutes the locus of the child's world as such. Indeed, the threat of biological (or moral) contagion is a common symptom of the obsessional-neurotic, one that they mediate through hand-washing, showering, and other such acts that are repeated until the neurotic subject is satisfied that purification has been achieved and the threat of contagion has been temporarily allayed. In a strange way, it may be that in the abnormal conditions of the pandemic the behaviors of the obsessional-neurotic are not as pathological as they may appear in "normal" circumstances but become somehow adaptive. Psycho-pathological means of mediating unseen risk and psychological states of anxiety and excitation, of attempting to control and impose order on an inherently chaotic world that the neurotic is overly sensitive to.

<sup>5</sup> Freud referred to obsessional-neurosis as "individualized religiosity" and religion as "universal obsessional-neurosis." See Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," trans. by James Strachey, in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 1995), 435.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. by Gregory C. Richter, ed. by Todd Dufresne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 57-60.

<sup>4</sup> Not to mention the other animal species that have been infected with the virus.

Alongside these acts of personal hygiene that attempt to mediate the boundary of the individual body and mind, the immunological boundaries of both the home and the nation state also become explicit.<sup>7</sup> Our excursions into public space are few and fleeting as we quickly conduct the basic acts we need to physically reproduce ourselves before returning home. While in public we avoid others, even becoming suspicious of them - each person is a potential host, each interaction raises the risk of infection. The home, a place that has always served as a symbolic site of refuge from the world now explicitly becomes a bounded space that we attempt to wall off against contamination from the outside world - a world that is no longer safe or controllable, inhabited by unseen and unimaginable threats. The threshold of the home becomes emphasized as a liminal space between the safety of the interior and the threats posed by the exterior. We sanitize our door handles and the objects we bring into our homes, washing the clothes we wore outside, casting off our masks into the rubbish bin, regulating exchange between interior and exterior. Similarly, the border of the nation that has always inherently been a site of the exclusion of "others," has been made explicitly so. As the borders of many nations have been closed to non-citizens, while citizens find themselves subject to quarantine and strict testing procedures before they are allowed back into the country, as the inherent entanglement of the logics and discourses of public health and border security is made apparent.

### A Return to "Normal"

After a month or so of lockdown in many countries, discussions in the media and the political sphere of "returning to normal" seem to be increasingly prevalent. We are, of course, in a state of crisis, yet, at this juncture, returning to "normal" may in many ways be less than desirable due to both the chance of a second wave of infection as restrictions are relaxed, and the fact that these restrictions provided for the temporary respite from capitalism's ever intensifying valorization process. As many have observed, the pandemic's monkeywrenching of global capitalism's business as usual has produced a decrease in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, seen animals returning to habitats that have been encroached upon by humans, and, in many countries, un-

precedented social democratic welfare measures. On another level though, it may be more pertinent to think of the significance of the pandemic in particular, relative to the role of the crisis within the context of the capitalist world system in general. While the virus may be a product of nature as such, the pandemic as a socio-natural phenomenon is as much a product of the practices of: animal agriculture, global transport infrastructure, the systematic underfunding of public health services, and a lack of pandemic preparedness as it is the virus itself. Furthermore, the effects of the pandemic are as much socio-economic as they are strictly a matter of individual or public health. In such a way, the pandemic has made certain inherent structures of capitalism apparent (as would a strictly economic crisis in the narrow sense): from its extractive and violent relationship to non-human animals and the environment at large, to its reliance on continuous production, circulation, and exchange in order to sustain itself and its insatiable demand for the production of surplus value, to its affordance of unequal rights to the working class and the excluded.<sup>8</sup>

Here it seems important to acknowledge that crises in general are not simply anomalies as such, but rather should be seen as symptomatic of underlying processes that are inherent to the very structure of global capitalism and its basic conditions and contradictions.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, crisis increasingly seems to be the norm for late capitalism, as the global financial crisis, extreme weather events, the so called war on terror, and now the pandemic have punctuated the first decades of the new millennium. Crisis, in its various forms, is in this sense very much part of how late capitalism operates, not so much a state of exception but increasingly a part of its normal operation as such. Drawing on discourses from psychoanalysis, Marxism, and contemporary medical science, the cultural theorist Eric Cazdyn has termed this condition "the new chronic." For Cazdyn, the new chronic "insists on maintaining the system and perpetually managing its constitutive crises, rather than confronting even a hint of the

<sup>8</sup> For a critical analysis of the political-economic dimensions of the crisis via the notion of "risk," see my article: Richard B. Keys, "The Danse Macabre: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Allocation of Risk under Capitalism," *&&& Journal* (April 27, 2020). <https://tripleampersand.org/danse-macabre-covid-19-pandemic-allocation-risk-capitalism>.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding crises as symptomatic of the contradictions inherent to capitalism, see Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), 74-76.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the bio-politics of the nation and the household, via the figure of contagion, see Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion* (New York: Autonomedia, 2012), 49-76.

terminal, the system's (the body's, the planet's, capitalism's) own death."<sup>10</sup> It is this very logic that we see in the demand for the return to normal. One that will no doubt necessitate a return to normal socio-economic life, or as close as is possible, while the pandemic is still unfolding. With elimination all but impossible for most countries, and new research suggesting both a higher rate of infection, and a much higher number of asymptomatic cases than previously thought, the logic of capitalism will necessitate the ongoing management of the pandemic as a chronic disease of the global social body. Re-framed as a chronic, rather than acute, disease, it will be managed through a variable system of border controls, social distancing, isolation, and quarantine, until a vaccine is available. This re-framing is necessitated by capitalism's requirement for the constant production of surplus value, and to avoid, at all costs, allowing any radical ruptural potential that is inherent to the pandemic as a true state of crisis to coalesce.<sup>11</sup> In such a way, the return to normal attempts to foreclose the potential of a radical break that is inherent to the state of crisis, and, in so doing, reasserts the normal state of affairs by which capitalism continually "colonizes the future."<sup>12</sup> Although, it seems due to the likelihood of successive waves of infection, and the inevitability of a subsequent economic crisis that is forecasted to be magnitudes larger than that of 2008, that normality may not be so readily restored.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Here Althusser's notion of 'the ruptural unity' is useful, in that his account of the revolutionary potential of crisis foregrounds the interplay of historical contingency and structural necessity. See Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 99-100.

<sup>12</sup> Cazdyn, *The Already Dead*, 47.