

## The Logistics of Pandemic

*Laurent de Sutter*

*A. Plague.* Agent Smith was exasperated. He had been brutally interrogating Morpheus for several hours now, without being able to crack him. Never had he been so close to the goal of his mission: to wrest from a human being who knew him the means of accessing Zion, the last resistant city. He was on the brink, however. But Morpheus' was entirely sustained by the conviction that he had just discovered the Chosen One – the one who, precisely, would allow Zion to rise up against the reign of the machines represented by Smith. In an unexpected move, the officer therefore decided to address the rebel captain directly, privately – and disconnected his headset from the Matrix. "I'd like to share a revelation that I have had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I realized that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment, but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and we are the cure." His was an aggressive and relentless monologue testifying for a superior form of lucidity – while demoralizing his interlocutor. Of course, it was quite possible to dismiss it with the back of the hand, as one would do with a speech too often heard, a caricature as it is drawn from time to time on the side of the great misanthropes. However, Agent Smith was not entirely wrong. If we put aside the rhetoric of contempt, there was something true in the description of a humanity with more than one trait in common with the modes of operation of a virus. Two points in his speech, in particular, echoed the truth: that which characterizes human beings and viruses by their tendency to move; and that this trend is related to the management of the consequences of their wild multiplication – that is, their quantity. One word synthesizes these two points: the word "logistics".

*B. Cohabitation.* In fact, the whole history of epidemics rests on something like a community of destiny: there are viruses only where human beings have organized themselves to live in larger groups than a few individuals. From what we continue to call "Neolithic Revolution" (i.e. around 9-7000 BCE), new techniques for exploiting the most fertile lands surrounding a certain number of hydrological basins, such as the Tiger and Euphrates Delta, indeed authorized the creation of the first sedentary installations. Composed of a few families at the start, these would become bigger over time and eventually form the first villages, the first cities – the first areas of mass cohabitation in history. However, this cohabitation did not only involve humans:

it also involved all the creatures that accompanied their sedentarization in the name of the requirements of food, equipment, etc. The Neolithic communities were therefore communities which included as many non-humans, animals and plants, as there were humans – or even more if we add microscopic populations living in symbiosis with them: various insects, micro-organisms, bacteria, etc. The Neolithic organization of communities was the first experiment in large-scale cohabitation between species, and even regimes, which were not necessarily made to live together – or, for that matter, to live together peacefully. Symptomatically, the first epidemics in history also date back to this period; it was as early as the Neolithic that we can witness traces of sudden disappearances of entire cities – disappearances whose only possible explanation is that they were due to brutal attacks of diseases. In fact, close coexistence with non-humans, as well as their parasitic populations, favoured inter-species exchanges, for better or for worse, certain animal diseases discovering an affinity for the human biological environment. Very early, therefore, the fact that humans discovered techniques for ensuring a more stable way of life, and a more efficient exploitation of the environment, paradoxically led to the reinforcement of other types of threats to its survival – the viruses also benefiting from the results of human innovations.

*C. Traffic.* But that's not all. Besides the establishment of a new ecology, the side effects of which were not mastered by those who wanted to be the main beneficiaries, the techniques of exploiting the world developed since the Neolithic era helped its diffusion. As long as certain resources were present (mostly water), it was possible to acclimatize the technologies and strategies developed in the large fertile basins. It was enough to adapt the logistics networks (that is, at the beginning, the first roads as well as the first irrigation and water piping systems) to the local context. Humans had always been nomadic: they knew better than anyone the importance of traffic – so that when they decided to settle in a specific place, they contented themselves with reversing its movement. Rather than spending their time traveling, they gradually organized ways to bring things to them – whether it was water, precisely, or, later, grain, livestock, workers, and so on. That is to say, the first human groups quickly transformed into *logistical attractors* – more or less important nodes in a network of circulation of beings and things without which local life would remain limited. The growth of the groups became conditional on the extension of its grip on its environment, and therefore on the capacity implemented by them to seize at a distance what they needed in order to ensure their subsistence – not to mention their development. For them to be able to live *here*, there had to be life *there* as well, and both should be put in communication so as to support each other. As was to be expected, this gradual extension of life management was not without consequences for the way parasitic populations of human beings managed their place, too. With the raw materials, the cattle or the traders themselves, the creatures that had made the Neolithic microcosm their residence also accompanied the meanders of its geographical displacements. If epidemics were born from the interspecies concentration organized by human beings, pandemics, on another hand, appeared with their spread over the entire surface of the planet. They were the mark of success in its colonization.

*D. Modernity.* The necessary consequence of all that is the following: there is nothing new in contemporary pandemics. They have accompanied human history as its shadow – or rather: as the shadow of the successes, more or less brilliant and more or less oblivious, which it encountered on the way to its own diffusion. It would even be possible to draw a kind of pandemic line, which would serve as a counterpoint to the traditional narration of the stages considered to be the most decisive in the human conquest of the planet. The great plagues that have affected the whole world since the time of Antoninus the Pious, in the 2nd century AD, all bore witness to a specific state of the logistical development of the civilizations that they ravaged. The epidemics of malaria, yellow fever, typhus, etc., which swept across the North American continent after the arrival of Europeans, also marked the fact that it is impossible to think of diseases outside the factory of the human world. By closing the globe on itself, the explorers also helped to complete the path of circulation for the creatures that accompanied them – whether pigs, rabbits and horses, a whole series of plants, like sugar cane, or, of course, bacteria and viruses. Pandemics of the industrial age, from this point of view, did not change much: they were content to unfold in a context where logistical connections were more numerous and where human concentration had reached a point of no return. With modernity, pandemics truly became pandemics, in the sense that there was no longer any corner of the globe that could claim to be outside the network of connections allowing the circulation of things and beings. But, from the point of view of their nature, industrial development and globalization did not transform the conditions of cohabitation between humans and their parasites; pandemics were inscribed in the fact that humans cannot live alone – and that certain forms of life take advantage of this impossibility of solitude to be able to exist too. Wherever logistics allow the multiplication of human beings, there will be creatures likely to profit from it; and the more this logistics will make it possible for a large number of individuals to survive, the more likely they are to harbour the very thing that is best able to destroy them.

*E. World.* When Martin Heidegger allowed himself his famous remark that animals were "poor in world", he was therefore twice wrong: not only do animals have a world, but this world, for a large part, is none other than the one we made. This is a great lesson from the discussions about whether we have entered the Anthropocene or not: we have suddenly discovered that a world is never given, but always made. All the activities in which human beings have engaged have no other goal than the constitution of something like a world, a liveable space, on the surface of a planet that it was not acquired that it was habitable. It just so happens that such a world is not built entirely by those who imagine it – for there to be a world, it requires the collaboration of a considerable number of beings, some acting in a more or less invited manner, while others operate behind the scenes. To speak of logistics is therefore to speak of all the conditions in the name of which there is a world, and therefore also of the consequences that the application of these conditions to the life of humans entails in terms of unwanted guests. We are not alone in the world; the very fact that there is a world implies cohabitation with myriads of other beings, from pieces of rock excavated in mines to microorganisms synthesizing oxygen or filtering the rays of the sun in the atmosphere. The exorbitant force of human beings, if there is one, therefore only consists in imposing a dominant note, a rule of order, on the world in which it had embarked the others, not without the latter then adapting it

to their sauce. Because it is the fact of all cohabitation to alter what we cohabit with – to contribute to modifying the design of the world made by those with whom we invite ourselves. In the case of pandemics, this alteration can be fatal for a whole series of individuals; for the others, it is rather a way of drawing the ultimate consequences from the facilities offered – until, by a defence reaction, these are closed. It would be foolish to believe that we could prevent it – that we would be able to decide access to the world as we pretend to decide access of such and such a category of person on the territory of such or such nation. In a world, closing a door is always like opening a window.

*F. Fault.* An essential conclusion must be drawn from all of this – a conclusion radically opposed to the one Agent Smith wanted Morpheus to understand in order to demoralize him. This conclusion would be that in the history of pandemics, and in particular in its contemporary aspect, it is not possible to designate the culprits, those responsible, the individuals to blame. There are many candidates, however: from industrial capitalism to neoliberal management of populations, including the colonizing West and the anthropocentric psyche of humans, they have not failed to receive the attention of critics from all walks of life. But there is nothing more ridiculous, more absurd, than this critical reflex. In the same way that a virus has no moral reason to blame the person it kills, no one is responsible for the state of the world that we all help to build – for our greatest benefit, and that of a series of other species. In reality, the very fact that the world is manufactured, the result of our care as jealous as incompetent, should arouse in us a paradoxical reflex of solidarity with the stowaways of the life we have organized. In the world as we have designed it, it has indeed become difficult to distinguish what is virus and what is not, what is parasitic and what is not, which world our logistics infrastructure is support of or not. While it is undeniable that a large number of parameters relating to the concentration and logistical extension of humanity on planet Earth could be better managed, this management is not a question of political or economic project. It is a question of a cosmological project – even a *cosmological* one. The roads, canals, bridges, rails, tunnels, cables, pipes, conduits, pipelines, which cover the planet with their networks, are by definition traffic systems without which there would be no life at all – to properly speaking: they are life, because they are the world. The whole issue, for those who would like to have more control over the flow of undesirable, therefore consists in starting by measuring to what extent, more than any form of discourse or ideology, it is from these systems that, all together, we depend. We can never get rid of this blurry border set – but at least we can learn the reason for it.

*Laurent de Sutter is Professor of Legal Theory at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is a member of the scientific council of the Collège International de Philosophie (Paris). From October 2014 to September 2015, Laurent de Sutter was Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Center for Advanced Study in the Humanities “Law as Culture”.*