

Being in Uncertainty: Thinking the Coronavirus Pandemic

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In times of crisis and uncertainty, one looks to leaders, however defined, to provide strategies for dealing with everyday issues and for guidance concerning the operative future. One also looks to writers to provide images and narratives with which to understand the unknowns of the situation at hand. Those of us who are paid to take information in and to help to pass it on to others are called upon now to try to provide such images and narratives. What I find transpiring around my dining room table or in emails from students and in exchange with colleagues and friends is a circle of the same questions: What does this Covid-19 situation mean? When will this period of fearfulness and curtailment end? What will the future be? How will our lives be changed?

Yet much of the present is for me about not imposing a narrative on what is occurring. I refuse to offer any summative notion of what this period means but rather want to suggest the need to be in its uncertainty. Comparisons to other plagues and what happened after them seem ill-thought-out to me, even if they provide us with placating coordinates. This is a global pandemic that has occurred while many of us live in states of relative physical social isolation, while simultaneously being in a state of extraordinary connectedness to spatially distant others, as we hold virtual meetings, email, app, facetime, tweet, instagram, and otherwise communicate from behind screens. Like many others, the Coronavirus pandemic has caused me to be in contact with friends with whom I have not spoken in years from countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Ghana.

Daniel Defoe describes the return to daily life as soon as the bubonic plague had run its course in London in 1665 as an instant return to the city's former "wickedness" or even "worse":

"Some, indeed, said things were worse; that the morals of the people declined from this very time; that the people, hardened by the danger they had been in, like seamen after a storm is over, were more wicked and more stupid, more bold and hardened, in their vices and immoralities than they were before; but I will not carry it so far neither. It would take up a history of no small length to give a particular of all the gradations by which the course of things in this city came to be restored again, and to run in their own channel as they did before."¹

1 Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. [1722]. *Gutenberg Project Online*, 1995, www.gutenberg.org/files/376/376-h/376-h.html.

We genuinely do not know what will happen when this period of self-sequestering is over. Many ask if this pandemic will produce the next *Decameron* or other great plague artwork or a new invention for better living. I am wary of the normativity behind these expectations. One of the best pieces I have read about our current moment is by Aisha S. Ahmad. A survivor of war and food shortages, she writes about the importance of avoiding the “productivity porn” that was posted everywhere as the security measures began, for instance, about building lean muscle, keeping to writing schedules, and finding new ways to do everything ‘better,’ including parenting. Rather, as she counsels, concentrate on the now, on keeping those around us as well as can be, attend to those who are alone, and adjust to an altered mental frame and way of being, a mental frame that will last even when this ‘crisis’ has ended.²

Hence, mine is a situated reading of the present, an *in medias res*. Situatedness means an awareness of one’s perceptual parameters and their limitations. I am a German-American, still legally a US American citizen, yet also a German civil servant as of many years. I am also the mother of three German children, and the grandmother to a German-Italian grandchild. My vision is therefore at least bifurcated, with family members living in Washington State and in California, in North Carolina, New York, Connecticut, and Boston as well as in Rome, the Netherlands, Sweden, Scotland, and in Germany.

Two Countries and Their Contrasting Affective and Legal-Cultural Responses to Covid-19

Germany: Earnestness, Calls for Extreme Caution, Collective Sacrifice, and Contingent and Calibrated Change

Angela Merkel’s televised address on 18 March 2020 provided a model in communicatively effective calm leadership. The uniqueness of her choosing this televised forum spoke for the gravity of the situation. Speaking quietly and almost without facial expression, she asked her listeners to address the gravest crisis since the Second World War and was bitterly clear about the government’s lack of precise knowledge of the future: “It is serious. Take this situation seriously.” She spoke of the need for transparency in a democracy and rendering governmental actions comprehensible, and also the government’s reliance on virologists and other scientists in its evolving policies. In good social democratic fashion, she lauded not only the heroism of health care providers, but also of all those people working as cashiers or filling the shelves in supermarkets to keep daily life going. Most importantly, and with a great deal of quiet authenticity, she referred to her own experience of having grown up in the GDR to state that she understood the pain involved in a government requiring its citizens to not move or travel freely. There was an expectation in this address that her listeners would engage with the complexity of the situation and the many variables involved and that they would take her and

² Ahmad, Aisha S. “Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 March 2020, www.chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Should-Ignore-All-That/248366.

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scientists' recommendations seriously. I found myself wet-eyed at this address, happy to see an individual leading so well. Reassured.

One witnesses a general trust in government and legal-cultural policies in Germany. Everyone I know is deeply concerned about the economic recession that will follow after the Coronavirus pandemic has run its course. Young people in particular are worried about what they feel is a lack of their future and about their lives having been put on hold. The university where I work sends out weekly updates in German and English to the entire community of students, faculty, and administrative and maintenance staff. University workers are requested to attend carefully to what politicians are saying and to stay actively informed. We are asked frankly to be in the current, ever evolving state of uncertainty. This is to be, as Merkel said on 16 April, in the "fragile intermediate success" brought about by coherence with the previous health measures. This means letting students know that we do not yet know exactly when we will see them face-to-face again, and nonetheless reassuring them that university life and their studies continue.

I chuckle about the groups of young men whom I pass by while running daily in the woods who are despite current social-distancing rules meeting to drink beer or smoke hash and listen to music. They have walked long distances to do so. I am encouraged by how carefully people around me accept and, yes, also enforce social distancing rules. This includes some better-than-thou finger pointing, for instance, about one's supposedly not walking correctly – that is one-by-one – on a country path. Yet there is also, as I see it, a rise in a sense of expressive solidarity, even as one complains about restrictions communally. Across the street from my apartment, people waiting to go into the sewing store exchange notes about how best to make masks. While standing in a stretched-out line for fresh morning bread, one makes friendly, masked remarks about the awkward dynamics of trying to maintain physical distance while nonetheless allowing pedestrians to pass by.

At the point of this writing, Germany is being lauded as the great exception due to its comparatively low rate of death as compared to the high numbers of people who have contracted the virus. Now an important debate has begun about relative costs. What is the calculus involved in terms not only of the population's physical health and of other material costs, such as loss of income and an increase of material precarity, but also in terms of psychological strains? This is not a brutal utilitarianism. Rather, it is a general and genuine question about the extent of the negative impact of the measures taken and the insistence on moving slowly. One asks if in an ageing society of baby boomers, the decision to keep schools closed is a weighing of the interests of older people – and this includes myself – against the interests of younger ones.

The United States: Denial, Obfuscation, and Deflecting Blame – Polarization and the Desire for Good Governance

Remarking on President Donald Trump's daily antics in White House briefings since the outbreak of the virus has been a study in contrasts with Germany's leadership and political actions during the Coronavirus epidemic. First, according to the president, the virus and the

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disease it produces was a “hoax” or a product of those “Deep State” experts whom Trump has never trusted. Or misinformation was spread by Trump about warm weather eliminating the virus, or the various drugs that would supposedly eliminate it. Second, Trump let politics get in the way of disseminating accurate information or moving to protect people. This with the general fractionalization in the White House and in the United States, more widely, has caused individual states to have to compete for resources and protective equipment and ventilators. Trump’s daily news briefings are platforms for a rehearsal of his favorite motifs. This includes xenophobia – “the Chinese virus,” “the foreign virus,” and the ban on European travelers entering the country in March – and a penchant for deflecting blame. The lack of medical supplies was the Obama administration’s fault. The pandemic is the WHO’s fault, or it is Dr. Anthony Fauci’s fault. It is the Democrats’ fault. It is the governors’ fault. These are Trump’s preferred, well-practiced, and previously also quite successful rhetorical moves. They have been noticeable since his early branding of himself during the 1980s, and, as an Americanist, I have been reluctantly analyzing them with students since Trump was elected president in 2016.

The real-life consequences of these moves have included a vast increase in hate crimes towards Asian Americans caused by such xenophobic rhetoric. Another effect is the still not insignificant group of Americans who, as my surgeon brother reports, when they visit his office tell him that they believe that Covid-19 is a fiction and an invention of what Trump calls “Fake News” media. This is distressing. More distressing still since the outbreak of the pandemic has been the daily and for me exceedingly painful revelation of the United States as a first- and third-world country. Regretfully, the people I know who have been infected with the virus are African Americans and Latinx individuals who mostly live in urban areas. Whereas the wealthier have retreated to home office in large spaces, often with access to the outdoors, this is anything but the case for those less well off. The stratification of access to health care and the quality with which it is given has never been more alarming than in the present when it is costing lives. It reflects “the unfairness of the economy—an unfairness measured not only in dollars but in deaths.”³ The numbers of people who cannot afford not to work distresses further, with unemployment rates now surpassing those of the Depression. With Trump calling on supporters “to liberate” their Democratic-led states from their governors and to exercise Second Amendment rights, we witness a president who is actively encouraging his supporters to resist safety measures and to engage in violence. I was moved by a recent piece in *The Atlantic* about an expat German academic who was for the first time in his life regretting his move to the United States and feeling “*Heimweh*” for Germany’s “boring, humorless, and far more competent political leaders.”⁴ A row of new political science books discuss the failure of the US American project since the end of the cold war. I see my country of origin’s failures now with pain.

In terms of my own ecology – the garden I am trying to cultivate with those around me – the virus has meant the following. The courses on presidential self-fashioning that I was planning

3 Gawande, Atul. “The Blight: How our Economy Has Created an Epidemic of Despair.” *The New Yorker*, 23 March 2020, 63.

4 Mounk, Yascha. “For the First Time, I’m Doubting My Decision to Come to America.” *The Atlantic*, 28 March 2010, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/stayed-germany/608980/.

to teach this summer term have needed to be altered to now dealing with understanding the Coronavirus pandemic trans-Atlantically. Two months ago, I was calling for Democrats Abroad to ignore Trump's tactics as the Diverter-in-Chief in order to concentrate on pressing political issues such as attacks on the independence of the judiciary, rollbacks of environmental protections, anti-immigration measures, and efforts to keep working-class people (Democrats) from voting. Trump's is a highly successful strategy of exhaustion, caused by the sheer volume of Twitter shouts in the night and the swath of erratic daily actions that need to be sorted out in terms of their political consequences. What I am now saying is that while we have to be canny about how this rhetoric functions, we also need to not allow ourselves to be diverted by it, or to be so exhausted by its volume and frequency that we inadvertently enlarge its compass and impact. Literally, it is dangerous to amplify it. This contributes to the branding and self-aggrandizing of Trump and the politics he stands for.

While recognizing the lesson of history that incumbent presidents have only very rarely not been granted a second term, I note that these are extraordinary times. One remarks on the discipline of the Democratic Party just before Super Tuesday in early March, with central contenders giving up the race in order to put their support behind Joseph Biden. Even good, if irascible, Bernie Sanders has conceded the need to act differently than he did in his primary competition with Hillary Clinton four years ago and to try to unite Democratic voters. There is an affective sense of the import of restoring good governance to the country and, as I read the affective moment, a genuine desire for unity against the background of increasing social-economic and cultural stratification in a time of dire need.

Crisis and Post-Apocalyptic Fictions

"Crisis" is a powerful lexeme and metaphor. It suggests caesura, a before and after and the need for immediate action. Like a lot of words and images being used during this pandemic period such as "outbreak," "spike," "death toll," and "killer illness," "crisis" moves us affectively into a state of fear and a sense of the need for urgent action. It interrupts thinking and the admittance of uncertainty. Particularly when efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus are coupled with war imagery, one needs to pause to consider their effects. This is a moment for media literacy and for consciously exercising sustainable media practices. Let's be careful to avoid an overexposure to fear news.

Instead, let's consider the genre of post-apocalyptic fictions. People of my students' ages have been readying themselves for the Coronavirus pandemic for years by participating in dystopic post-apocalyptic fictions and games. I mention the books and films *The Hunger Games*, the comic and television series *The Walking Dead*, and games like *Dying Light*, *Fallout*, and *The Last of Us* to channel readers' cultural markers. A theory of fictions says that they imagine the current world *avant la lettre* and propose alternative ones. In the realm of imaginedness more general truths can be explored and reflected on than non-fictional referentiality can allow for. The popularity of zombies and dead cityscapes during the last decade has not been an accidental

occurrence. It has succeeded an era in which wealthy, aristocratic, and highly sexualized vampires added passion and drama to mortal humans' lives.

These post-apocalyptic scenarios have been readying us for Covid-19 in terms of the imaginaries they co-create. And the recent Twitter image of the anti-lockdown protest in Ohio from 16 April that so resembles the *Walking Dead* attests to the resemblance of life to fiction. Post-apocalypses ask participants to exercise new skills in altered worlds, where the memories of past life and ways of living are only vague. They reflect critically on current realities. And they provide avenues with which “to examine the resources [needed] for coping with real and imagined existential terror.”⁵ As an admired former student tells me, post-apocalyptic games are emotionally satisfying because they are genuinely frightening and demonstrate the best and worst of humankind when it is forced to go into survival mode. They ask us to dwell in the uncertainty of the now.

A reader of this text, a friend and colleague, wrote that she misses its central argument. On this 21st of April 2020, the message is to rest in the uncertainty of this time. I suggest that we resist the desire for narrative closure, and avoid making too early predictions about the future and continue to be in our current state of not knowing. Those sequestering in relative comfort like myself might want to avoid productivity porn as well a fear news and be choiceful about the narratives and images with which we engage and that we disseminate. This means avoiding propagating misinformation, like Trump's, and remaining painfully aware of how situated and contingent our relatively privileged experiences of this pandemic are. We really, really do not know.

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⁵ Moya, Paula and Jonathan Leal, “ENGL 76: After the Apocalypse: Speculative Fictional Narratives at the Turn of the 21st Century” (course description, Stanford University), https://english.stanford.edu/sites/english/files/courses/syllabus/after_the_apocalypse_1.27.17.pdf