

CHANGE



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Times of Change, Changing Times The Temporal Disturbance of COVID-19

The time is out of joint; O curs'd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

It is perfectly obvious that COVID-19, declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020, has wrought enormous changes in the world. These transformations are expressed in all dimensions of our lives: in the new day-to-day realities; in our emotions, today marked by the fear of contagion; in our economy; and in heightened inequalities and violence. They are also seen in our conceptions

of the world, our research agendas, our ways of working. In fact, the coming changes in our ways of life, of working, of socially interacting are still difficult to imagine, much less to calculate precisely.

But if any dimension of our existence expresses the changes that have already occurred, it is time, or the temporality of COVID-19. Conceiving of this crisis in the code of time offers us a good perspective on its complexity. If anything can characterize the time of the pandemic in its multiple dimensions and scales of understanding, it is

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something we could call “temporal malaise”: a time that is “out of joint,” that has lost its way, has lost its wits, and expresses itself as a slight indisposition, as disquiet and unease, as frenetic anxiety, or as frank irritation.

Time can be seen in COVID code because the pandemic that has overtaken us permeates, top to bottom, all orders and dimensions of our existence. And since our existence is temporal, then everything that happens to us, everything we do, the way in which we do it, and what we can no longer do are all mediated by the new times: the times imposed by the pandemic. This is so much so that today the social sciences and the humanities are thinking about the world and national problems the pandemic has brought into being and also rethinking themselves starting with the pandemic. Health and healthcare systems, migration, education, housing, the use of space, social rights, the economy, mobility, gender violence and many other issues are today being thought about in COVID code. But also being considered are sustainability, climate change, modern rationality, and the transformations that COVID will necessarily bring to our lives, as well as—with hope—the possibilities of transformation so that there is no return to a normality that will not only not be possible but is also undesirable.

I will dedicate this brief space to putting forward some of the main temporal dimensions of the pandemic; dimensions that manifest themselves on scales that, regardless of their apparent distance, are fully interwoven in this world health crisis. In the first place, the pandemic as a temporary dislocation of nature and society. If we go to its true origin, the pandemic did not come from China or Wuhan. Its real roots are to be found in the abuse of nature that many authors have already pointed out. We are quite aware that global warming and environmental mutations have led to this and other previous pandemics. And they can lead to many more if we do not change our tack. The scientific community has been alerting us for years about the relationship among the loss of biodi-

versity, the destruction of ecosystems, intensive agriculture and animal husbandry, the illegal trade in wildlife, and the increase in zoonotic diseases.

In the opposite sense, the drop in human activities that the pandemic has forced across the globe, the slowing rhythm of that world machinery of productivism, has diminished the irritation of a wounded, abused planet, bringing us clean skies, less human-made noise, and the recovery of wildlife. This kind of forced social hibernation showed just how damaging to our common home is the breakneck pace of a way of life centered on accumulation and consumption at the cost of our own health, of life itself. As Gabriel Markus rightly points out, the world order before the pandemic was not normal: it was lethal.¹

The pandemic can be seen as a global, total event. It is a total event not only because it involves the world geopolitical dimension, but because it permeates our existence top to bottom. It is a multidimensional event that touches on all aspects of life. And it is global because there is no corner of the planet that escapes its effects. For the first time in history, the entire world seems to stop, or at least to slow down. More than three billion people, half the world’s population, on all the continents, in the great cities and in small towns were, are, or will be locked down. The isolation of those who can shut themselves up at home takes place at the cost of others who cannot because they provide the population with food, services, and the products it needs. Economic activity has collapsed; unemployment rises; the crisis threatens us.

According to Humberto Beck,² an event is not a moment that brings historicity to a standstill as the occurrence of a unique, singular phenomenon that will mark a before and an after in the flow of history. It is, rather, a temporal, historical condensation of the heterogeneous, which spurs both the saturation of meaning and its apparent suspension. Continuity has been broken, and, in the kingdom of discontinuity, we are not completely sure what direction we can take: we aim for a return to a normality that has remained in the recent past. We are facing a future that does not seek the novel, but to turn back—as though that were possible—to return to a regularity that has been destabilized. It is a global event because it happens to everyone at the same time, everywhere, and affects all societies and individuals even regardless of whether there are places where that little drop of saliva that begins the small-scale replication of the worldwide disaster

has not arrived yet. The effects, to a greater or lesser degree, will be felt in every corner and crevice of the planet. As never before, we are now contemporaries, and we are also contemporaries with a virus that will mark an era in which living generations will remember this time when we lived dangerously.

In daily life, we all feel the loss of the sovereign use of our time. Some of us could make short- and long-term plans, take trips, move about, organize meetings and events. For others, the majorities in countries with greater social inequalities, the times of a job and a more or less secure wage or a precarious—but in the end possible—job are also threatened.

The temporal mechanism resulting from a social organization that pays attention to schedules and calendars has been tremendously upset, forcing us to work, when we are able to, in front of a screen to be able to work from home. While it is true that work now invades private spaces, today, private spaces are almost completely assimilated by the rhythms, sequences, needs, and demands of work. Even children must do their learning at home. But only a minority of the population has a home office. The less fortunate have no more screens than the windows in their precarious homes, and they cannot stay home, or they do and suffer the consequences of not being able to earn their daily bread.

From the temporal point of view, the main characteristic of the onset of the period we are experiencing

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materially and symbolically, besieged by the state of emergency brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic, is doubt, uncertainty, and the destabilization of the temporal series that unfolded before. The latter gave our present, immediately before the emergence of the pandemic, a stabilizing cross-cutting axis between the recent past and the more-or-less shared images of the near future.

Time can now be our worst punishment or our best ally for the gradual construction of a new us: true otherness, which knows that salvation is either collective or does not exist, is more imperative today than ever. **MM**


Notes

- 1 Markus, Gabriel, "El virus, el sistema letal y algunas pistas para después de la pandemia," *Sopa de Wuhan* (Argentina: ASPO, 2020).
- 2 Humberto Beck, "El acontecimiento entre el presente y la historia," *Desacatos, Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, no 55, CIESAS, 2017.


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