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Containing the future shock

Crises like the one we are experiencing now are violently heuristic. For anthropologists, they are fascinating events in their ability to deconstruct old-established certainties – which is basically what we try to do as researchers. Crises arouse speculative mindsets and prophecies. While the present slips away before our eyes, future horizons suddenly multiply and expand dramatically, until replacing the past as matrix of values and beliefs. This could explain why future anthropology has gained much popularity in the last two decades, as terrorism, financial crashes, economic crises and climate change filled our lives with uncertain futures.

The COVID-19 outbreak raises tremendous epistemological challenges for future thinking. First, because the degree of uncertainty is extremely high. We lack both the basic (epidemiological and economic) information and the imaginaries to think what is coming. Second, because most of us are in containment. While our bodies are locked up at home, our minds keep travelling around the globe at the speed of a rumour on the Internet. As ethnographers deprived of the possibility of (non-virtual) fieldworks, our access to information relies largely on the news, social networks, online encounters and personal experience. Third, because the pandemic seems to make everyone believe more strongly in their political certainties: progressives see it as an opportunity for a social and ecological leap, conservatives for more individual surveillance and border control, work flexibilisation and capitalist concentration. Lastly, because we are collectively experiencing a shock that affects our perception of the future – a 'future shock', to borrow Alvin Toffler's expression. Some speculations about post-COVID scenarios may well be regarded as peritraumatic dissociations in the face of an unbearable present.

If visions of the future are necessarily shaped by contemporary experience, how could we envision the coming years or decades in other terms than radical change? This would explain the tautological assertions that flourish in media headlines these days: 'the world will never be the same', 'why everything is going to change', 'there will be a before and an after coronavirus', etc. Yet, previous crises have proven our ability as societies to come back to business as usual, if not more business than usual. Assuming that change will happen on its own is probably the surest way to avoid any change at all, or leave the choice of direction to others. Unlike earlier crises, containment interrupts the course of emergency, opening a parenthesis that brings opportunity to absorb the shock and observe the political 'doctrines' that emanate from it.

We should hence contain predictive compulsions and take expert divination cautiously. The intensification of the future is a sign of critical times and deserves urgent research as such. Forward thinking should not become a headlong rush or an escape from an ongoing crisis that still requires our full presence, but rather should serve as a conceptual exercise to shed light on the present and anticipate political struggles over the future.

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Religious returns, ritual changes and divinations on COVID-19

Since the end of January, religion and coronavirus have had a variety of occasions to interface. The Islamic State called the pandemic a ‘divine retribution’. *Feng shui* masters ascribe it to a preponderance of the metal and water element over fire in the early year of the Rat. Large religious gatherings have been finger-pointed as major clusters of diffusion of the virus in Singapore, the City-Island-Nation-State where I am writing down these thoughts, in neighbouring Malaysia, as well as in South Korea. Since then, the fabric of gatherings, the sense of togetherness, the meaning of congregation, the ritual praxis of pious bodies have changed dramatically across sectarian boundaries. Some gatherings went digital, live-streaming functions, broadcasting rituals, offering baptism on Zoom, confessions via Skype, Virtual Reality pilgrimages and online registrations for worship of the ancestors. Other religious communities resist the prohibition to congregate, inevitably attracting scorn and condemnation as superstitious, irrational, fundamentalist, while poignantly showcasing conflicting ideologies of healing and unequal epistemologies. When (it feels like ages ago) we were still able to assemble in private and public gatherings, some communities adopted hygienic measures for safety which changed their liturgy – Catholics applying holy water with disposable q-tips, Hindus sharing *prasad* on platters rather than hands, and a long series of etcetera. Others, more recalcitrant to change, proclaimed that they will still kiss their Torah, touch their Pir’s shrines or, in the case of the Greek Orthodox community, sip from