

Between hate speech and fear: throwing evil across the border

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Abstract *This text seeks to problematize a dominant representation about epidemics, pandemics and major catastrophes, which describes its origin as external, exotic and foreign. In general, both from Hollywood catastrophe cinema, to medical-scientific discourses, and from philosophy to conspiracy theories and hate speech, any threat or evil is placed outside of society itself, there is always another, who prosecutes a moral fault that justifies the need to combat, isolate or eliminate them. We propose to analyse arguments that have circulated around the current coronavirus pandemic, especially those that place the possibility of salvation in isolation and fear, to problematize certain ideas naturalized in discourses that are later translated into political practices or actions.*

Key words *Coronavirus, Fear, Hate speech, Pandemic*

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The origin

The primary representations of epidemics and pandemics (whether they come from journalists, the hegemonic medical discourse, or fictional movies or books) coincide in showing a threat of external origin that invades the population and propagates rapidly, provoking terror and death. Although the immediate danger can come from a neighbor who sneezes without wearing a mask, the origin is always foreign.

The current coronavirus pandemic is a good opportunity to ask ourselves if this representation is true or if it hides an even more alarming truth: the origin of the danger is actually internal.

If we follow the propagation of the current pandemic, not on the world map, but in its symbolic, social, and institutional dimensions, we can observe an interesting path in relation to what the discourses on the pandemic show and hide.

The disease appears in China, one of the primary engines of the global economic system. The origin is an apparent mutation of a virus in a bat that can suddenly affect humans. The first step is therefore completed with a habitual representation: a nocturnal animal, associated at least in Western culture with darkness and certain ideas of evil. Additionally, this animal comes from a country represented to us as far away and exotic: China. With this, a number of prejudices appear. Who knows what strange and perverse practices the Chinese might have carried out with a bat to cause this ill? (Do the Chinese eat bats for example?). A first symbolic border is crossed: the border separating the natural and the animal from the human and the cultural. We have an external pathogenic agent inhabiting human bodies. From this point, the epidemic expands throughout the world, when infected people travel from one country to another using the streamlined system of air transport. They cross borders and customs exchanging merchandise, greetings, and viruses. When the pandemic is declared, the free movement of bodies around the world is halted. At that moment, the danger of coronavirus is less relevant at an individual level than at a social level: all sources report that the primary danger of SARS-Cov-19 is not its lethality, but rather its potential risk of saturating health systems. The virus crosses into another sphere: from the individual to the social, from subjects to institutions, from the individual body to the “social body.” In parallel, the measures taken by this “social body” to protect its institutions (the health system) and

its members will affect us, the same subjects, and our lives through quarantines and prohibitions to circulate and meet. In this way, the public space will also be affected. In all of these leaps, from the personal to the social, from nature to culture, from the real to the symbolic, finally (or primarily) one last crossover is produced: from health (disease) to economy. The news of the pandemic propagates quickly through the economic sphere, where the free flows of financial capital and the stock market panic forecast an economic recession that will have a very real effect in the so-called Real Economy.

In this article, we will trace the path of the pandemic in its passage from the real to the symbolic, putting into evidence the cultural as well as natural character of the disease, how it affects the social body in addition to the individual, and to what extent it constitutes an economic problem while at the same time having its origin in this very same sphere. With this, we hope to show that the external origin in which a large part of the arguments related to COVID-19 are based should be questioned.

On the economy’s dominance of nature, what science did not see

What we know from the last epidemics and pandemics produced – “mad cow,” avian flu, SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome), Influenza A AH1N1, among many others – is that the first leap, the first infection occurs in the mutation of a virus that passes from an animal species to the human species.

Our intervention in nature, which includes the transporting of species from one ecosystem to another and the breeding and reproduction in artificial environments, does not affect only those species or quality of the foods we consume – whether animal or vegetable – but also the spaces from which they are extracted and the spaces to which they arrive; the largest risks of producing, and not just transmitting but also reproducing, new diseases lies in the way we relate to our environment and the way we produce our food.

All the epidemics and pandemics in recent history were in one way or another anticipated by scientific studies, although none of these studies were noticed until after what they had predicted came to pass. To give one example, regarding the Influenza AH1N1, the journal *Science* had published an article in 2003 regarding the mutation of the swine flu virus and its relation to

the type of animal production that concentrates large quantities of animals in very small spaces¹. In January 2009, another article published in *Science* warned that influenza A (H1N1) had passed from pigs to humans sometime between November 2008 and January 2009, and could begin to infect a large number of people starting in March². In the case of coronavirus, in 2016 the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America had published in 2016 an article highlighting the probability of future outbreaks of coronavirus similar to the already known SARS-CoV, of bat origin³. Four years after this information was available, the first cases began, with a propagation so fast it was impossible to plan for all the dimensions and consequences of something that had already been foreseen.

What had not been foretold nor seen by disciplinary/disciplined science was that in the same way that viruses mutate and infect people, in their spread they also affect the social body and the economy.

In other words, the sickness that threatens to kill thousands of people, isolate millions, collapse health systems and lay waste to the ethereal markets, does not come from a total external and exotic agent, but rather is originated in the form of food production of the globalized economy itself.

Although the virus also opens new markets, not just medicines but also biosecurity and security in general. Everything is capitalizable, from basic needs like hunger or health to the probabilities of contagion or biological terrorism (in which conspiracy theories regarding the origin of pandemic viruses are based). These conspiracies, which once again locate the sickness outside, in “the other,” have existed in every new epidemic; in countries with very different or even opposing political orientations, narratives regarding bioterrorism are repeated and seek to attack and control the social space. Such narratives do nothing more than hide the internal origin that produced the sickness.

From “discourses of fear” to “discourses of hate”

Since modernity we have naturalized the idea that fear is something subjective and external to politics. Nevertheless, anthropological research has shown since its origins that, while emotions are psychic phenomena that involve the dimension of the body, they are embodied thoughts⁴, or as Marcel Mauss⁵ observed, social facts, as their

manifestations are culturally established: we learn how to feel. At the same time, the expression of emotions is a semiotic event that is significant, communicative, imbued with meaning and feeling. Every society teaches how to feel – for example, what to fear, how to fear it and how to react in the face of a threat. The learning experiences within families and in different social institutions as well as from cultural productions will contribute to the production and reproduction of ways of feeling that model the production of subjectivities, identities and differences, fears and hate.

In this article, when we speak of fear, we are not referring to personal but rather political fear, that which generates a type of anxiety regarding a danger that is projected as able to affect collective wellbeing – insecurity, moral decadence, the collapse of health systems and the economy. Personal fear is the fear of getting sick, and does not go beyond the person who feels it. Political fear is fear projected from and directed at the collective, the relation with others. Fear is contagious and isolates, like coronavirus. And yet a narrative that is establishing itself as an interpretation of the present pandemic sustains that fear and isolation in the crisis have a positive side. The situation gives each of us the opportunity to realize the ills of the current model of globalized capitalism, which would open to us the possibility of leaving it behind in favor of another, more just, post-materialist or post-consumerist model of society. We can find this optimistic progressive argument everywhere: from messages in social networks celebrating the return of crystalline waters in the Venice canals, to well-intentioned news programs, to intellectuals like Berardi or Zizek.

We recognize that those who uphold this argument have their hearts in the right place. The authentic danger is the conservative narrative that sustains political figures like Trump or Bolsonaro, whose hate speech at the same time seeks to negate the crisis and sustain economic activity as if nothing were happening. Like all Hollywood disaster movies, such speech places the origin of the sickness outside of the community. It starts with a bat, a dark little nocturnal animal, and an Asian who eats it as part of some exotic feast – as always, Orientals and traitors are, if not synonyms, close cousins. These others are represented as having a moral fault that justifies the need to combat, isolate or eliminate them. Socially, the virus passes from one’s own society and is relocated in the other, the different, the enemy, the exotic.

Progressive discourses base their optimism in social responsibility, which worked well while fear was central and the role of the state was to govern that fear; nevertheless, in governments like that of Argentina, that we could call successful in terms of the early measures taken to control the pandemic, the sense of calm, security and control of the situation that was able to install itself in the society (in addition to the urgent needs of many), lead to a situation where fear gives way to individualist behaviors, and instead of society and the common good people begin to think about individual liberty and well-being. And many posit the need to return to the “discourses of fear.”

Fear is seen as a potential way to regulate everyone’s behaviors (with everyone either quarantined or sick) and make them reflect on their own moral faults: being egotistical or consumerist, for example. And from there achieve repentance and redemption. In this “solution” fear acts as a force capable of galvanizing a society idiotized by the media, besotted by consumerism, lost in narcissist logic. Fear functions here like a wake-up call, like a shock that jolts the social body⁶. And the subsequent isolation allows for a process of introspection and reflection under the light of this fear.

It is important to note that for this operation to take place, fear has to be understood as an element external and prior to the society and culture. In other words, fear is understood as an instinct, not as a cultural construction. If fear is interpreted as something intrinsic to the society and produced by the culture itself, learned and internalized by the subject through a number of social institutions, it becomes clear that it does not have the capacity to repair the situation of socio-cultural decadence in which we supposedly find ourselves.

What is sought, then, is to go back to an earlier time and different state of things in which the problem at hand did not exist. This is a typically conservative argument: an escape from the present by moving backward, not forward. It seeks to conserve the social status quo rather than transform it. The object can be fear of the virus, or not, it does not matter. It can be any element that allows someone to be blamed, punished, forced to repent, to eliminate the sin that that person or group introduced into the social sphere.

The second element of this narrative presupposes that fear and enclosure will make us reflect upon the excesses of capitalism, in such a way that a majority of citizens who are critical and committed will emerge that can push for a sustainable economy and more just society. It is

not that this option is closed to us; it is desirable position for the left and should be fought for. But even if we ignore that the dynamic of social networks tend to fix our prejudices rather than force us to think more deeply about them; even if we except the doubtful premise that we will all be capable of turning into Descartes while quarantined, seeking the truth armed with reason as our sword and introspection as our shield; even then, the question we should ask ourselves is the following: Since when has it been a leftist proposal that individual introspection is the road to a better society? Reasoning in this way brings us closer to the genre of self-help than an open and democratic social debate regarding the society we desire. To put it another way: the people are not in the streets during a quarantine.

The most conservative hate speech at some point converges with the previous discourses, when promoting not only hate based on race, class, etc., but also fear of difference, the different or the strange/foreign/exotic other. This fear operates in the same way; all are socio-cultural constructions.

The end of the pandemic

If all of this is going to end in a way that is not social catastrophe, it will be when we are able to return to the public space, not while we are hiding under our beds ruminating over our worst nightmares. A leftist escape from the quarantine, the pandemic and fear, if there is to be one, will have to do with no longer looking with fear at the external agent, an invigoration of the social, and an understanding of fear as a socio-cultural construction. This first step will allow us to once again focus on a problem that is already well-defined: that the cause of the pandemic is not the exotic eating habits of Asian cuisine, but rather the result of production processes within current capitalism. And it is armed with this knowledge that we can debate and organize, to undo the economic fibers that got us into this situation, without appealing to moral regeneration.

If we find ourselves convinced of a lack of principles that sustain public life, there is always a possibility of validating the experience of fear. By considering fear a pillar of community life, we refuse to recognize that our fears are nothing more than symptoms manifesting the permanent conflict of injustice and inequality in society. If we are incapable of putting into evidence the real conflicts that make fear a political instrument, it is impossible to seek out tools to face these con-

flicts; all of this will lead to us continuing to be dominated and submitted by fear. If we understand the objects of our fears and hate as truly political, we can debate about them as we do other issues that we recognize as political problems; unfortunately, this is not the place currently occupied by fear or hate in the political arena.

Doctors know little about COVID-19 and those of us who are not doctors know even less. It

is clear that it is very contagious, just like fear. It is also clear that it does not make people's hearts or brains grow beyond what they were before. Fear and enclosure do not have a regenerative effect either.

This first understanding is necessary in order begin to think about how to move forward, not backward. We must not confuse utopia with Arcadia.

Collaborations

The first author, A Sy has the original idea and is responsible for doing the research along with the co-author. E Lopresti, as specialist in cultural studies developed most of the arguments exposed in the article.

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Article submitted 18/09/2020

Approved 18/12/2020

Final version submitted 20/12/2020

Chief editors: Romeu Gomes, Antônio Augusto Moura da Silva