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Theory & Event, Volume 23, Number 4 Supplement, October 2020, pp.
S-1-S-3 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2020.0074>



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Introduction

Keally McBride

Early March 2020. I was grabbing what I thought I might need for the next few weeks away from my office, when I hastily wrote to ask whether *Theory and Event* should publish a Supplement on COVID-19 and the Death of the Public. San Francisco (CA) was the first American city to extend shelter in place orders, and they remain in effect seven months later. 2020 has brought a wave of realizations and crises, and today the loss of public space seems a minor note in a symphony of upheaval. We all know the litany by now, but what appeared to be an epidemiological crisis during the spring has instead, by the fall, become a simultaneous collapse of our systems of earning, producing, knowing, ordering, caring and breathing.

As always, one finds the best articulation of reality in fiction. A character in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* observes, "[r]eality has grown old and gone senile; after all, it is definitely subject to the same laws as every living organism—it ages. Just like the cells of the body, its tiniest components, the senses, succumb to apoptosis. Apoptosis is natural death, brought about by the tiredness and exhaustion of matter. In Greek this word means 'the dropping of petals.' The world has dropped its petals." (57) As someone who has been waiting my whole lifetime for the inherent instability of our systems to become manifest, this moment is not entirely unwelcome, but it is certainly not comforting. We do not know how the story ends, because every end contains a beginning. It remains to be seen what growth shall spring out of the ashes and compost of this world's petals.

This Supplement offers a rich and varied engagement with 2020. With thanks to Yusuf Salaam, I remind us all that 2020 also means perfect vision. Taken collectively these essays provide a nuanced lens for seeing our world today, uncovering the roots of our maladies and pointing out horizons towards which we might orient ourselves. It is a pleasure to see some small themes recur throughout the volume, and how more central topics such as location, ecology, racial justice, embodiment, and precarity run through the issue like streams that gather speed and water along the way.

I will offer just the briefest introduction to these smart and moving contributions, as they speak most powerfully in their own register. William E. Connolly presents a galloping assessment of the many strands of the pandemic as an event. He tears down the borders and

frameworks that we imagine as our protection and that we also use to order the world. “Now dualism, reductionism and bracketing lose their standing as the only alternatives to choose between,” instead offering “multiple temporal trajectories, periodically crossing chancy encounters, encourag[ing] closer contact between anthropologists, nonwestern cosmologists, bacteriologists, virologists, global theorists, climatologists, and ecologists in the study of complex intersections that help to compose the world.”

Nandita Sharma explores the structures of sovereignty, ecology and population control, pointing out how our systems of controlling people, and places provide the perfect foundation for our vulnerability to a pandemic such as this one. Her long view of postcolonial nation-states helps link different aspects of our current experience and place it in historical perspective:

The material basis for the emergence of global pandemics is the further penetration of capital into ecosystems (forests, tundra, etc.), fossil-fueled climate catastrophe, industrial agriculture and the creation of industrial “meat farms” breeding ever new viruses, and the continuing expropriation of our land (and water and air) so that the vast majority of people in the world are forced to rely on paid employment to purchase the commodities produced in capitalist markets in order to survive.

Extending the method of revealing core systems by excavating the margins, Lorenzo Rinelli—writing from Rome—offers thoughts about migrant laborers, their long history and tenuous present in the city. As is so frequently the case, tremors in Italy mean rougher waters on the Mediterranean, and a proclamation that the country was no longer a “safe harbor” meant that they could legally let migrants drift at sea. “In the case of Italy, this is the first time in history that the government has declared that the country cannot be defined as safe and, as a consequence, rescue ships could not dock in Italian ports.” Andrew Poe’s ruminations on surviving his infection of COVID-19 in Denmark provide a lens into different systems of power, exploring the distinctions between sovereigns as captains of ships and shepherds tending to their flocks. He observes that in the United States we have neither: “It is as though the United States has a fanatical sovereign, in contest with himself.”

Flipping this articulation on its head, Sara Rushing reports from Montana by reviewing Hobbes’s catalogue of ailments in *Leviathan*. Rather than a divided sovereign, she observes that we have a divided patient that refuses to accept a singular diagnosis. We are experiencing an auto-immune disorder in which one part of the body is attacking the other. “It doesn’t take much of a leap of imagination to picture the American body politic as attacking itself from the inside, trying to sev-

er or subdue the portion that threatens to infect and destroy the whole organism.” Dan Degerman dives into the medicalization of political discourse, exploring how public health has unexpected—and incompletely—trumped the imperatives of neoliberal productivity (no pun intended). Degerman points out that while *homo medicus* is certainly more public-minded than the *homo economicus* described by Wendy Brown, it is by no means a more agentic or politicized creature.

The next two pieces in the Supplement focus more intently on economic shifts. I engaged in a lively discussion with Paul Apostolidis about work, workers and political organizing today. We wrestled with how conditions of solidarity might happen, and how the pandemic has changed our collective awareness of the relationship between work, life and death. Albena Azmanova takes a powerful swing at contemporary capitalism, pointing out that the inequality that has been so loudly amplified in the past months is not the cause of our precarity, global capitalism is. She points out how “[i]n fighting the pandemic, our societies are deploying the very same policy logic that created our current predicament”; however, these tools will not end the current “metacrisis of capitalism.”

The Supplement closes with two ruminations on the future. The first is a photo essay by Pedro Lange-Churión and John Zarobell about the racial justice murals that have sprung up in Oakland, CA over the summer, redefining the spaces of protest and economic collapse. The murals now dominate the city, offering artistic visions that hold the largely abandoned public spaces. Lange-Churión and Zarobell engage with Benjamin’s theories of the city to argue that these mural activists are making today’s historical paintings. Charmaine Chua’s essay about participating in a sanctuary community established in Minneapolis in the summer following the fallout from the murder of George Floyd provides a fitting conclusion. She offers a nuanced yet frank assessment of the challenges of trying to rebuild the world in a different model. Chua’s essay explores the personal and organizational difficulties of transforming “modes of relationship and forms of attachment within them” even as alternative futures seem to recede in the distance.

I would like to give special thanks to Tom Dumm for his editorial assistance in soliciting and editing contributions over the summer of 2020. I also give my most sincere gratitude to adrienne maree brown for her permission to reprint “Meditation Time Travel 2050” from her blog, written as an invitation to Movement Generation activists to imagine expansive possibilities for themselves and our future—it seemed a fitting way to open this Supplement. I also want to thank Cristina Beltran and Kennan Ferguson for this opportunity to connect with so many intelligent observers. Engaging these texts has given me solace, clarity, and inspiration; I hope they do the same for you.