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Rachel Adams, Crain Soudien

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# Article

## Viral life: Covid-19's destabilisation of our thinking

Rachel Adams and Crain Soudien

RAAdams@hsrc.ac.za; CSoudien@hsrc.ac.za

The question of life is and has been one of the most important and keenly contested questions of the modern era. What constitutes life? When does life begin? What is the essence of human life? What is the distinction, and how is this evidenced, between being alive and having life? And, whose life matters? These ideas were famously explored in Bruno Latour's (2013) *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* where he lays out the dilemma that faced us. All we have to rely on in understanding the world in which we live and in defining ourselves against that which is not 'us', he suggested, was science. But, can we trust science: '[w]hen it is a matter of obtaining valid knowledge about objects as complex as whole systems of the Earth, knowledge that must lead to radical changes in the most intimate details of existence for billions of people, it is infinitely safer to rely on the institution of science than on indisputable certainty. But also infinitely riskier' (2013:4). The risk lies in placing our *trust* and understanding of the world in institutions of knowledge that have historically positioned themselves at the disposal of processes of modernisation which have systematically damaged the earth's capacity to support the very life that is now under discussion.

With the arrival of the novel coronavirus, these questions about life and how life is identified and known, took on new dimensions. Governments the world over had to make critical decisions about protecting life or livelihoods, including here in South Africa. Decisions had to be made, too, regarding whose life to save where there was not enough medical equipment and support to save everyone. While the lives lost to the coronavirus were publicly counted in statistical logs, the impacts on life of national lockdowns and the measures imposed by states to stymie the spread of the virus were not so readily grasped. Almost immediately, however, it became clear that the effects of the virus and of the regulatory

measures imposed were far from indiscriminate. The virus lived through and made manifest historical social inequalities, resurfacing old questions around whose life mattered (Wallis 2020), and old Darwinistic justifications that some life was expendable through processes of natural selection (Asma 2020): the natural order of life and the greater order of things.

In this short piece, we return to the question of life. After tracing the history of the concept of life in our dominant system of thought – that which we call *Western* – we explore the phenomenon of the thing that has come to be named as a ‘virus’ within this ecology. We explore the virus-thing as an identifiable object and its uneasy location within the taxonomy of life. As we show below, we see how this explanation depends on discursively and scientifically constructed definitions of certainty. It is this certainty, we argue, which presents us with a particular kind of politics. The virus-thing resists attempts to contain it within the definitional capacities of our dominant thinking. It falls, using this dominant thinking’s own logics, outside what we might call ‘the intelligible’, *and* – perhaps for this reason – outside of the proliferation of critical thinking on Covid-19 that we are seeing now. It raises questions for how we interpret dominant scientific and social concepts which have been put to work in order to manage our ethical responsibilities with respect to life – between that which matters and that which doesn’t. In the context of the wider events of this year, and particularly the global Black Lives Matter movement, we see this contribution as critically important for exposing the deeply problematic foundations of our dominant narrative of life, of what we value and how we come to allocate worth and with that, dignity, to that which we think of as life. We acknowledge the sheer difficulty of what we are drawing attention to here, but the stakes are high. Because they are so high we caution against our instinct to avoid engaging with the historical ways in which our thinking has been socialised and *naturalised* to accept the idea of life as inherently subsisting in natural economies of inequality. Our intention is to challenge existing thinking, and to begin to look for new ways of thinking about the meaning of life – new ways which could help us explore alternative social and political modalities with which we might share the responsibilities and benefits of Gaia.

## **A history of life**

### ***Part 1: Zoe and bios***

There are, as might be expected, an almost infinite number of cosmological accounts of life. They all matter. They matter because they encompass within them foundational accounts of the collective and individual worth of everything,

known and unknown, within the universe. Most, not all, work with the idea of life as a passage from *beginnings*, the movement through experience of *development* and, almost always, *endings*. Some, of course, refuse the idea of a journey. Buddhism, as an example, seeks to concentrate our attention on the present. The world's dominant system of thought, using the logic of beginnings, has its roots in ancient Greece. The Greeks, or at least the Hellenics from that part of the world, approached the idea of life in an essentially binary way. Life, for them, could be placed into two categories: *zoe* and *bios*. These categorisations continue to hold much currency within critical thought. They have, through social structures such as the state, what we describe here as perlocutionary power. Perlocutionary power is that capacity, which goes largely unseen, to persuade people towards particular ways of acting. It is in some ways raw discourse. These powers have come to inflect the discussions and reflections on Covid-19 in distinct ways (see here the really interesting reflections of scholars such as Agamben 2020, Ahmad 2020, Hull 2020, and Peters and Besley 2020). Broadly, then, *zoe* is the condition of being alive inherent within the living natural world. Life, in this perlocution, is confirmed against defined biological markers: the existence of organically arising cells which move and metabolise, reproducing themselves and responding to their environments. *Bios*, in contrast, constitutes fully moral and political human life, dependent on ideas of sentience: the capacity to feel, perceive and experience subjectively. Traditionally, if organic matter was thought to have capabilities for reaching consciousness, intelligence and moral sensibility, such matter constituted life to be protected, and therefore the status of *bios*. This is key to a dominant legal understanding of life that has been used in deciding if and when it is morally and legally acceptable to abort a fetus (Kushner 1984). (Interestingly, in Ohio the need to direct state resources to combatting Covid-19 has been used to justify halting 'non-essential' abortions (Politi 2020)).

More broadly, how the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* is measured and policed has been, perhaps, *the* central question of modern politics. In Giorgio Agamben's now popular exploration of these terms in his book *Homo Sacer*, he draws from Aristotle in defining *zoe* as 'bare' or 'mere life' and *bios* as 'politically qualified life' (1998). Critically, *zoe* constitutes the basis for the establishment of the sovereign, whose power is defined by the ability to kill bare life and protect and foster political life. The sovereign establishes itself and its power through the declaration of a state of emergency, whereby the legal powers of the state can be legitimately extended. When countries worldwide issued states of emergencies suspending key aspects of the law, including

specific human rights like the right to freedom of movement and association, in order to protect lives against the coronavirus *and* to protect the constitutional order which gives the states their powers and legitimacy, many commentators referenced Agamben's work (Agamben 2020, Ahmad 2020, Hull 2020, and Peters and Besley 2020). We have in this political move of the declaration of states of emergency, an important conceptual understanding of life. Biopolitics in motion. What this conceptual framing made manifest was the direct link between the protection of life against the threat of the novel coronavirus, and the amassing of state power through the declaration of states of emergency – or, in South Africa, a state of disaster – which resulted in the loss of livelihoods and a largely uncertain impact on life. Additionally, we must recall from the work of Carl Schmitt that the threats to sovereign power and to the lives of its citizens that legitimises the declaration of states of emergency, are essential to state power (2005). For this reason, such threats are to be contained, held and managed, but not negated.

Agamben's account of sovereign power and its hold over the categories of life is central to the point which we are seeking to make here. It is about what such thinking authorises and legitimates. Relevant here, in seeking to emphasise the significance of Agamben's 'bare life' characterisation, is the philosopher Hannah Arendt. Arendt too engages with the Aristotelian distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. For Arendt, *bios* is fully human life that is socially recognised as such. She, however, creates the concept of the living dead, those whose lives are not recognised as politically important by the social order and therefore vulnerable to termination, exploitation and torture (Arendt 1958:176). Here, then, is the implicit, logic of worth with which we have to reckon. To anticipate our argument, it has within it multiple ontological conceits about being. These, as the eugenics movement at its height demonstrated, included the race/ethnicity/nationality complex of representation, gender and ability. Arendt noted that this idea of the living dead was racialised with effect, and has, as her example, the Holocaust and the Jewish concentration camps. Achille Mbembe has described the operation of the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* as the central technology of race (2013, 2017, 2019). For Mbembe, racialised life is always subject to the sovereign power of death, whether killed under the name of terrorism, or whether beings left to die in social, economic and environmental conditions of existence that are simply unlivable: zones of indistinction where the lines between life and death, 'resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred' (2013:40). The deaths that occur in these zones of indistinction are uncounted and unaccounted for: socially worthless.

We have to, however, take more seriously the historical making of this dominant apprehension of our ecology. It is to that task that we now turn.

### ***Part II: The birth of life in modern Western thought***

The making of the *modern* – that which gives us the perlocutionary state and accompanying it, our discursive order through which we define, identify, order and regulate – is central to our argument. To Europe, then, in the last 400 years. Two major shifts took place in Western thought during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They fundamentally constituted the way we, supposedly the ‘moderns’ (which, Latour [2013:8] insightfully, of course, called into question), now think of life. In them lies the provenance of the contemporary understanding of the category of life. The first was the secularisation of the state, with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 being a key historical marker. With the formal establishment of sovereign nations headed by governments of men, rather than the church, the responsibility of life shifted from the hands of the ecclesiastical order to the state. This involved what was then a radical shift in the meaning of life. Prior to processes of secularisation, the church ordained that life on this earth was a temporary state in preparation for eternal life in the heavenly cosmos. Thus, at this point, *bios* would have been taken as life capable of redemption and salvation, and therefore reserved for those considered to have a soul. Notably, up until the sixteenth century, and indeed later, women were considered not to have souls, following – it was thought – a decree from the Synod council of Bishops at Macon, France, in 585 CE which determined that as women were fashioned from the rib of Adam, they were not fully human but only tools to be used by man to ‘perpetuate the human race’ (Fleischer 1981:107). The soulless, and therefore unhuman, was also a category bestowed on the racial other. In his history of racism, George Frederickson details the history of theologically sanctioned racism premised, in part, on the notion that the racial other was without a soul (2002). However, with increasing secularisation, ‘life in this world’ (Ludwig 1685, cited in Israel 2001:xx) became *all there was* and, too, the basis on which the politics of the state was organised. While racial and gendered discrimination continued in many diverse forms, the question of whether a human life had a soul held little relevance in the secularised order. Michel Foucault traces the history of the secularisation of life in his account of the rise of biopolitics, which names a modern form of politics that takes the life of the population as the object of state power (2003), and which Agamben later drew on in his articulation of biopolitics as the political ordering of *zoe* and *bios* inherent to the constitution

of sovereign power, as above (1998).

The second historical shift out of which the category of life as we know it today was born, was the rise of the natural sciences that sought to explain the natural world. The rise of the sciences as the dominant form of knowledge for understanding life and the world went hand in hand with the decline of theological rationality, and ushered in the modern structures of knowledge which form the basis of Latour's critique. Thus, based on empirical evidence and observation, the natural sciences sought, in the first instance, to classify all forms of life. This provided new secularised understandings of the provenance and meaning of life that now broadly fell under the domain of science. Carl Linnaeus, while not the first natural historian, undertook the most comprehensive of the early exercises into the classification of life, beginning with the designation of two kingdoms of living organisms: *regnum animale* (the animal kingdom), *regnum vegetabile* (the vegetable kingdom); and one non-living: *regnum lapideum* (the mineral kingdom). As these systems of classification became more complex with the advancement of scientific thinking and technologies of observation, other kingdoms were added with many further genera and species. Today there are considered to be five major kingdoms of life (*monera*, *protista*, *fungi*, *plantae*, and *animalia*). Linnaeus' system of classification also extended to a taxonomy of human life with two major legacies. Under the taxon *anthropomorpha*, Linnaeus grouped together humans (*homo*) with apes (*simia*), producing the first account of what are now considered the order of primates, and one of his major contributions to taxonomy. In addition, Linnaeus proposed a four tiered classification of the human species: *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, and *Europeanus*. For each group, Linnaeus offered a series of defining characteristics, beginning with skin colour and later including phenotypical descriptions of the personalities and sensibilities of the different varieties of the human species (1735; 1758). While Linnaeus was by no means the only or even the first so-called naturalist writing about life and classifying human beings into different categories and orders, his classification system produced raciology, the primary sense-making framework for understanding differences amongst and within human beings. Speaking polemically this race science played a central role in the scientific justification of racism.

A hundred years after the last edition of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* was published, another major break-through work was published that, too, radically altered both the course of science and the dominance of scientific thought over theological doctrine as having the answers to the major questions of the world. In 1859 Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published, offering a

major re-telling of the origin of the human species and relegating the creation story of Genesis to cultural myth. It was a paradigmatic publication which put forward a number of major ideas about evolutionism still accepted today. This includes the idea that environmental conditions – such as disease or even miscegenation – impact, over time, not just the individual but an entire social milieu and species. And too, the idea that certain species – those that excelled in their environment – developed phylogenetically, becoming more complex, sophisticated and, in the case of the human species, more intelligent. The survival of these higher forms of species were, therefore, to be considered natural; as was the extinction, or death, of the less superior species (Darwin 1869). In his rendition of sovereign power, which he traces as a forerunner to biopolitics, Foucault writes that at privileged moments of biopolitics (the coronavirus now generally considered one), the killings that occurred under the state of exception were not just legitimised by law – or its constitutional extension, but by evolutionism, whereby the death of the racialised other is biologically natural, or even necessary (2003). Evolutionism justifies racism and racism – the idea that the existence of different human races is a biological fact – justifies evolutionism. Indeed, the lesser-cited subtitle of *On the Origin of Species* is: *On the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (Darwin 1869). The idea, too, gave credence to the notion that European civilisations were naturally superior to any other – a particularly useful narrative to be deployed at a time when Europe was engaged in the colonial expansion of its territories across the world. Now, evolution – not the biological evolution of the virus from mutant forms, which we turn to in a moment – but the evolution of the human species, has been dangerously invoked to explain away – in effect, to naturalise – the impact of the coronavirus on human life. In a column for the *New York Times* in April 2020, Stephen Asma wrote: ‘[d]isease and death are not bugs in the system, but features. In fact, the cold-bath truth is that natural selection works only because many more organisms are born than can survive to procreate’.

Historically, these classificatory systems – which worked to present a priori, naturalised, knowledge of all forms of life – failed to categorise the ‘virus-thing’ within their totalising taxonomy. In this way, the virus is a confounder within classificatory systems of life: an error in the system which reveals the fallacy of the system as a whole. Like bacteria or blue-green algae which are considered to be prokaryotes – that is, unicellular organisms without nuclei but instead with a singular circular chromosomic structure which is either RNA or DNA – viruses exhibit some prokaryotic characteristics as they contain RNA or DNA which



is integrated into the host cell genome, over-riding the host cell's replication programming and thus inducing the replication of the viral RNA/DNA (Lecoindre and le Guyader 2006:50-51). However, viruses are not cellular structures, but particles known as virions which lack other physiological characteristics found in living cells, such as plasma, membrane, ribosomes or, like bacteria, a nucleus. On the one hand, viruses assert a vitalism in their relentless will to reproduce, in the unanticipated multitudinous movements of novelty and mutation. A virus can too – and there is some debate here – resurrect itself (Claverie and Abergel 2016). Thus, if life is defined as the ability of matter to reproduce, viruses – to an extent and where a host cell is available for such reproduction – can be classified as living. On the other hand, without metabolism of its own – no autopoietic functions, surviving only through parasitic attachment to a host cell, viruses have – far more often – been classified as non-living. Slavoj Žižek has described a virus, in relation to Covid-19, as 'a kind of zero-level life, a biological caricature not so much of death-drive as of life at its most stupid level of repetition and multiplication' (2020).

Žižek's critique of the virus – of the concept of viruses – however, is inadequate. His representation of it, or, more accurately, his non-representation, his making of it a non-thing, is symptomatic of the ethical economy of our dominant modes of thinking, which allocate worth. In this biopolitics, the virus itself holds no meaning and is, therefore, not only expendable but, actively, that which must be removed. Other than recognising it in its capacities for circulation and reproduction, as 'bare life', it is of zero-meaning and, to push the logic, -worth. Yet, rather more critically we would argue, we do not understand it. The categories of life by which we have historically been bound, are undercut and destabilised by the virus, whose form of being is not so readily grasped by our current systems of thought and classification.

But, thinking speculatively, we have little idea, in their complexity and variety, what viruses enable. Their complex relationship to other life forms around them demands that we renegotiate, collectively how we think of worth. The fact is that many viruses, known and unknown, exist in the world today. Are we now, as 'sovereigns', to embark on a journey – a *journey* – of eradicating them from our existence? No, we have to live with them in, first of all, a posture, a *dharma*, the Hindu concept which refers to an order which makes life and the universe possible, of recognition and not extrusion, expulsion and voidance. We cannot describe a virus as zero-life. We, secondly, in our approach to viruses, need to offer sensibilities of humility, even awe. We do not fully understand, and perhaps never will. And so we have to renegotiate the moment in which we are.

Our argument here is that this thing, the virus, calls attention to what we want to describe as the necessity of inserting into our *knowing* cultures and traditions the condition of radical uncertainty. We see this as promising, as signally an opening in undoing the historical ways of knowing life that have underscored systems of allocating worth, of positioning *being* in deterministic and developmental hierarchies of superiority and inferiority and, on these bases, to discriminate, now almost mindlessly, as we do and to then offer the world a template for inequality which we are not allowed to dispute. If we can open up new ways of understanding life that do not bind us to hierarchical or hegemonic ways of ordering the world, then we might be able to move toward more egalitarian notions of life and living in community with other forms of life.

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