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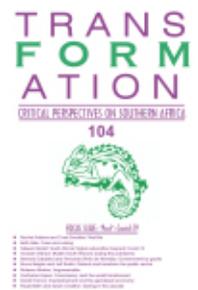
## Coronavirus, and the world transformed

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Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa, Volume 104, 2020,  
pp. 93-102 (Article)

Published by Transformation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2020.0035>



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# Article

## Coronavirus, and the world transformed

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The psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, once remarked that certain states (of mind) were not conducive to thinking. He was of course thinking about the person being somewhat overwhelmed by traumatic events or emotions. It strikes me that to some extent the advent of the coronavirus is an instance of being unconducive to thought. How should we think of this pandemic that shows no signs of abating? Like the intellectual trauma suffered by the Crow Indians who were forced to move in the mid-nineteenth century from a nomadic to a settled existence, and in the process they lost not only their traditional world but also the concepts to understand their past and present, we too seem to have suffered a loss of concepts to think through our 'viral time' (see Taylor 2007).

As necessary as all the data is on infection rates, recoveries, deaths, immunity, production of T cells, and much else, for the planning of the care and treatment of people with Covid-19, it seems that *thinking socially* about the virus has been a casualty of information gathering, and at times, information overload. Elif Shafak (2020:81) reminds us that we 'live in an age in which there is too much information, less knowledge and even less wisdom. The ratio needs to be reversed. We definitely need less information, more knowledge, and much more wisdom'. Her corrective for this state of affairs is reading and thinking, and as a novelist primarily, her concern is with stories and storytelling, and so for Shafak (2020:82) '[k]nowledge requires reading. Books. In-depth analyses. Investigative journalism. Then there is wisdom, which connects the mind and the heart, activates emotional intelligence, expands empathy. For that we need stories and storytelling'.

An appeal to storytelling in the midst of the pandemic might seem a little frivolous, but then again it might allow us to connect with our inherent sociality and humanity. One of the greatest storytellers of our time, John Berger, was able to compassionately portray the everyday social struggles

of migrant workers in Europe, the trials of peasant farmers in the rural hinterlands of the French Alps, and the life of an English country doctor in an impoverished rural community. These are intriguing and beautifully written accounts of ordinary and everyday life, and yet they transcend the particularities of their situation, and tell us something about what it means to be human, what it means to care for each other in the face of adversity, and how to have hope in our uncertain futures. One wonders what Berger might have had to say about the coronavirus pandemic were he alive today. He did write a very fine and moving novel about another pandemic, AIDS, called *To the Wedding*.

Besides keeping track of the daily infection rate, the number of recoveries, and sadly the number of deaths, it seems that people are searching for stories that help make sense of what the pandemic means to our everyday lives. For instance, Jacqueline Rose notes that the sales of Albert Camus's *The Plague* (published in 1947) 'have increased exponentially, an upsurge strangely in line with the graphs that daily chart the toll of the sick and the dead. By the end of March, monthly sales of the UK Penguin Classics edition had grown from the low hundreds to the mid-thousands and were rising (they are now up 1 000 per cent)' (Rose 2020:3). The figures of the pandemic, locally and globally, are faceless and fear-inducing, and the anxiety of 'will I be able to avoid being a COVID statistic' are uppermost in many people's thoughts, and so maybe there is a solace in the everyday stories that we read. The *Daily Maverick* has consistently highlighted the stories of the courage and resilience of many frontline health professionals and workers in their dedicated daily fight against the virus and in their attempts at keeping people safe and healthy. Significantly these personalised accounts of doctors, nurses, and hospital cleaning staff have been accompanied by photographs and the words of the people focused on. Literally, putting a face, albeit sometimes covered with a mask, to the dedicated individuals working in the midst of the pandemic.

Taking two stories, somewhat at random, the complexities of the impact of the pandemic on ordinary lives is revealed in a way that the economics and epidemiology of the pandemic just don't quite capture. Peter Piot, 71 years of age, and the director of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, got infected in March and spent a week in hospital. Being interviewed while recovering at home in May he said: 'I was concerned I would be put on a ventilator immediately because I had seen publications showing it increases your chance of dying. I was pretty scared, but fortunately, they just gave

me an oxygen mask first and that turned out to work. So, I ended up in an isolation room in the antechamber of the intensive care department. You're tired, so *you're resigned to your fate*. You *completely surrender* to the nursing staff. You live in a routine from syringe to infusion and you hope you make it. I am usually quite proactive in the way I operate, but here I was *100% patient*' (in Draulans 2020, emphases added). Here is a man who has spent his professional life fighting infectious diseases, Ebola and HIV/AIDS, and now finds himself succumbing to one, Covid-19. Succumbing, both in the sense of getting infected and getting very sick, and seemingly having to give over agency to the disease. While more and more is being known about the virus and its effects each week, we are still in the dark about much too: for instance, what are the long-term effects; can we get re-infected once we have had Covid-19; what exactly is long Covid; will the coronavirus be with us always; and for how long will a vaccine protect us? What happens to our humanity under such unpredictable circumstances? Do we become more caring and compassionate, or do we hunker down and look after ourselves and our *immediate* family and associates in a survival of the fittest mode? A kind of surrendering and succumbing even if we personally haven't been infected!

Dr Piot then describes the experience of being released from hospital: 'I was released from the hospital after a long week. I traveled home by public transport. I wanted to see the city, with its *empty streets*, its *closed pubs*, and its *surprisingly fresh air*. There was *nobody on the street* – a strange experience. I couldn't walk properly because my muscles were weakened from lying down and from the lack of movement, which is not a good thing when you're treating a lung condition. At home, I cried for a long time. I also slept badly for a while. The risk that something could still go seriously wrong keeps going through your head. You're locked up again, but you've got to put things like that into perspective' (in Draulans 2020, emphases added). His description of the London streets sounds like something from a post-apocalyptic movie or novel. To emphasise the severity of the climate changes because of global warming, many people prefer to refer to the climate *catastrophe*, rather than merely indicating a climate *crisis*. Supposedly we can get over, or solve a crisis, but less so a catastrophe! Are we now moving into a time of 'viral catastrophe' where we will always be trying to keep a pandemic at bay? Is this the so-called new normal of perpetually 'empty streets', of everybody at home defying human sociality, of unprovoked crying and poor sleep, and ever alert to the invisible monster at our front door?

Many, including Peter Piot, are putting their hopes on a vaccine: ‘Let’s be clear: Without a coronavirus vaccine, we will never be able to *live normally again*. The only real *exit strategy* from this crisis is a vaccine that can be *rolled out worldwide*’ (in Draulans 2020, emphases added). There is a lot here to think about. The assumption that a vaccine will offer us an exit strategy, and that we will be able to live normally again, presumes that we know what we are exiting from, and even more problematically that we were living normally before the pandemic hit. Furthermore, given that capitalism seldom lets a good crisis go to waste, and that Big Pharma has been one of the most predatory institutions when it comes to profiting from (literally) human frailty and misfortune, not to mention the currents levels of vaccine nationalism, it seems unlikely that we can expect worldwide roll out of the vaccine.

The second story I want to refer to comes in the form of a letter from the film maker Rodrigo Garcia (2020) to his father, the acclaimed novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He starts his letter with the following: ‘April 17 was the sixth anniversary of your death, and the world has gone on largely as it always has, with human beings behaving with stunning and creative cruelty, sublime generosity and sacrifice, and everything in between. One thing is new: a pandemic. It originated, as far as we know, in a food market where a virus made its leap from an animal to a human. One small step for one virus, but a great leap for its kind. It’s a creature that evolved over an incalculable time through natural selection into the voracious little monster that it now is. But it’s so unfair to refer to it in such terms, and I regret if my words have offended it. It actually bears no particular ill will toward us. It takes and takes, because it can. Surely, we can relate. It’s nothing personal’. However, it seems very personal given the fear and trembling that accompanies people’s concern of becoming infected with the virus. People want to blame somebody or something, they want to demonise somebody or something – it is the wet food markets’ fault; it’s the fault of bats; according to the soon to be ex-president of the USA it is the fault of the Chinese; it is the fault of (medical) science in so far as not being able to produce a vaccine in record time; and so on. It is everybody and everything’s fault except our own. We have made this world, this globalised capitalist disaster, where the narcissistic pursuit of profit has resulted in the unmaking of our world, and the profound disruption of the human and natural world.

The anti-social dynamic of capitalist relations of production means that we don’t easily learn from history, and prefer to lurch from one crisis to the next in the triumphant hope that the future will be better. And as Garcia

reminds us, ‘*A pandemic is back*. Despite the great advances of science and the much-celebrated ingenuity of our species, our best defense so far is to simply stay indoors, to hide in caves from the predator’ (emphases added). We are not short of examples of pandemics from the recent past, Ebola and HIV/AIDS, and obviously many others further back in time, and yet we were so unprepared for this one, both socially and economically. Covid-19 has exposed how dysfunctional our societies are, and especially so for the majority of poor people. It is a truism to note that the socio-economic foundation of our society with its glaring levels of inequality was not going to be able to help the poor and the marginally employed during this time of the pandemic. The poor weren’t being helped with health care, housing, education, and food security *before* the pandemic hit, and so it is unsurprising that for the majority of poor people things have gotten that much worse. Many have noted the vulnerability of millions of South Africans in the face of the pandemic, and through individual and organisational means have come to the aid of poor communities, knowing full well that the government’s aid packages would not begin to alleviate the plight of poor and working class households. Rodrigo Garcia reflects some of this concern and compassion when he imagines his father’s humanity: ‘You would pity our frailty; you would marvel at our interconnectedness, be saddened by the suffering, enraged by the callousness of some of the leaders and moved by the heroism of people on the front lines. And you would be eager to hear how lovers were braving every obstacle, including the risk of death, to be together. Most of all, you would be as endeared to humans as you ever were’.

I suppose one way of endearing us to humans would be to listen to the stories of how people are making sense of what is happening to their lives during the pandemic. It is not just about what meaning people are giving to what is going on in their lives in this ‘viral time’, but also how they are getting by. How are people, with few resources, managing to feed themselves, to still live a life with some dignity, and to imagine a future that is unpredictable but yet still carries some hope? How should we think about the world post-pandemic, assuming there is going to be a post-pandemic future? The pandemic world, the now, and the post-pandemic world are regularly referred as the ‘new normal’. Rodrigo Garcia suggests that life will never be the same, and dr Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the US, says we will have to find new ways of being social. For the most social of beings it is quite a terrifying realisation that our inherent and necessary sociality could make us sick, and even kill us!

While the interpersonal and group glue of touching, hugging, shaking hands, being in close proximity to each other on social occasions is evident in many cultures, we could reasonably easily think of different ways of being social, and we already have.

Significantly, we are not being asked to think of different ways of being social as an economy, as a polity, as a society. The social formation that would be the ‘old normal’, the pre-coronavirus society, is what got us into this mess in the first place. The global neo-liberal order of the last three decades, from the capitalist triumphalism of the demise of the Soviet Union and the breaking down of the Berlin Wall, to the economic, or rather financial, crash of 2008, has not considered different ways of being social. In fact, it has continued with its anti-social actions if the austerity of many fiscal plans and the dramatically rising inequality is anything to go by. Grace Blakeley (2020) makes a number of important points regarding the political economy of capitalism during the pandemic, when she writes: ‘Few could have imagined that 2020 would be the year the world entered a new phase of capitalism, as the links between states, banks and the world’s biggest corporations become so tight that they seem to fuse entirely. The stagnation of the past decade represented the death knell of the speculative mania that characterised the era of financialisation, which collapsed under the weight of its own excesses in 2008. Amid the pandemic, we have witnessed its replacement – state monopoly capitalism – begin to emerge’.

Furthermore, she notes that ‘... societies around the world are facing mass unemployment, falling incomes and widespread corporate and personal defaults. Far from a V-shaped recession, it will probably take years for the economy to recover to pre-crisis output levels. [...] The severity of the pandemic-induced recession is at least in part a result of the pre-existing vulnerabilities of the global economy. After a decade of slow growth, surging debt levels and rising inequality, we can rarely have been worse prepared for a new recession’.

We do indeed need to find new ways of being social as a society, as an economy, and we should resist the ‘new normal’ if it has any features that characterised the ‘old normal’, which seems to be very much with us still. Given Grace Blakeley’s analysis of the current economic conjuncture the ‘new normal’ is likely to be much worse than the ‘old normal’. In her view, ‘The legacy of the corona crash will be the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a tiny oligarchy, composed of senior politicians, central bankers, financiers and corporate executives in the

rich world. The challenge we will face when this crisis subsides will be to wrest control back from those who have taken advantage of this moment to increase their power and wealth. The only way to do so will be through a radical democratisation of national and international economic and political institutions, giving workers, consumers and communities a say in decision-making within publicly owned companies, central banks and throughout local government and the central state – and giving the poorest states in the world a voice in international governance. The alternative is to watch as democracy is finally consumed by capitalism'. It seems we cannot wait for the crisis to subside as there is no knowing when this will be, and it also depends on what crisis we are talking about as the pandemic has exposed how crisis-riven many aspects of our social and economic lives are. Already the rich and powerful have taken control of the *social* and *economic* resources needed to deal with the pandemic, and ordinary people's agency in many instances has been usurped as they passively and abjectly wait for hand-outs.

The 'old normal', the pre-pandemic society, is not one we should want to return to. As social thinkers and researchers we might want to analyse more precisely the nature of the society we find ourselves in as the 'old normal' has by no means been left behind. The pandemic has seriously disrupted all levels of functioning of society, and it seems that many governments around the world, including our own, are against all odds determined to return to the same socio-economic functionality of the pre-Covid social order. We hear very little talk of radically changing the way we do things as a society, of at least re-thinking some of the taken-for-granted fundamentals of how we organise social life, and we are especially silent on how we are going to solve the devastating effects of structural inequality.

The dystopia of capitalism and living in uncertain times has not been conducive to getting us to think about what it might mean to build a new world. Gramsci spoke of the interregnum of the old dying and the new not yet born. The pandemic might not have killed the old world, but it certainly has damaged it, some would argue irreparably, and so we could potentially be in an interregnum, a space that opens up the possibility of re-imagining our world, and dare we say it, encouraging some utopian thinking. Many commentators are saying that life will never be the same again, and yet it is not clear what will be different. Will it be capitalism with a mask on, ever vigilant for the next pandemic, viral or economic, or will it be something completely different that focuses on the pleasures of more sustainable ways of living? As Rottenburg (2020) argues, it makes no sense to see the human and

natural worlds as ontologically separate, and thus we need to understand that we co-habit with beings in the natural world and with pathogens, ‘out there in nature’ and in our bodies. If there is to be such a thing as the ‘new normal’ it will entail recognising that with the increasing degradation of ecological systems, the intensifying density of urban living, the global migration of human populations, and the ever closer contact between humans and animals, that there will be future instances of pathogens jumping from animals to humans. This is our future, this is our ‘new normal’, and not some benign slightly modified version of how things were before the pandemic.

These ideas about life and disease (pathogens making us sick) are not new, and can be found in the early work (1943) of one of the foremost historians of biology and medicine, Georges Canguilhem. Canguilhem (1978) argues that the science of life, the science of living beings, is also the science of what constitutes the possibility of disease, death, monstrosity, anomaly, and error. For Canguilhem, scientific progress is not founded through a process of finding the truth out there in the world, but rather comes about through understanding that scientific knowledge is rooted in discovering the ‘errors of life’. Canguilhem’s (1978) seminal work, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, questions how we understand the notions of the normal, the abnormal, the pathological, the healthy, the diseased, the anomaly, and he refuses to settle for easy contrasting distinctions between these interrelated and co-defining terms. For instance, at one point he defines disease as ‘not simply disequilibrium or discordance; it is, and perhaps most important, an effort on the part of nature to effect a new equilibrium in man. Disease is a generalized reaction designed to bring about a cure; the organism develops a disease in order to get well’ (Canguilhem 1978:12). This is not the usual way we look at or understand disease, but Canguilhem wants to insist that we should also understand disease, illness, as part of our existential experience as living and thinking beings. Disease is not usefully grasped or managed if it is seen as something ‘out there’, something external to us.

In other words, the coronavirus is not something ‘out there’, whether the ‘out there’ is that it originated from China’s meat markets, from pangolins, from bats; in fact, the coronavirus is very much ‘in here’, in us, in how we live in close proximity with other humans, and animals. And so the co-habitation between humans, animals and pathogens that Rottenburg (2020) talks about will not only be ameliorated through technological means, through science, through some external medical intervention, but will also require that we fundamentally alter the ways we live and organise our societies. The

realisation that human health is integrally bound up with the health of the planet is slowly starting to take root in many parts of the world; however, the realisation that the health of the planet is integrally related to the mode of production seems not to be receiving the same attention.

Whether it is the economic historian, Adam Tooze (2020), writing about the economic impact of the pandemic for the world economy, or Sheree Bega (2020) making a case for what we need to do to avoid an era of pandemics, it is noticeable that the nature of the economic system that we are operating in is not addressed. Clearly the pandemic has had devastating consequences for the economies of the world, and the effects have been uneven across countries depending on the nature of any particular country's economic system. Is it useful to talk about the world economy and to suggest corrective measures against the virus that all countries can and should adopt? This strikes me as a profoundly ahistorical way of understanding socio-economic systems, and furthermore it is in danger of reducing the problems besetting the so-called 'world economy' during the pandemic to technical solutions. The current lack of cooperation about the global and fair distribution of a potential vaccine surely points to the fact that the world economy is not a homogeneous system, but rather is made up of competing economic and political systems.

As Richard Blackburn (1990) reminds us, the relations of production also entail relations of destruction. And while capitalism has a lot to answer for in terms of its contribution to destroying the world, all modes of production have to contend with their negative effects on the natural world, on living beings, and on human sociality. The current pandemic, and the certainty that there are many more to come, means that we urgently need to think about the kinds of societies we currently live in, and hopefully want to immerse ourselves in democratic political practices to create fundamentally different ways of living, and of making a living. To end where I begin: we need to create public spaces conducive to thinking about these possibilities at least.

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