

In the Covid: Some Reflections for Our Resonant Situation

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Abstract

In a series of loosely connected reflections, the author attempts to situate the COVID-19 emergency relative to a more general sense of crisis in the early twenty-first century. French thinkers Bernard Stiegler and Michel Deguy are deployed to grasp the ecological character of this moment. The language and figures of confinement and de-confinement are considered with pleasure and curiosity throughout. The real conditions of a region much less affected by the virus than many others and the challenges and paradoxes of locality-in-emergency that are implied by this fortunate state of affairs are brought into relation to the broader world situation. Navigating the social changes underway and to come is briefly evoked, leading to questions of culture, leisure and education in conclusion.

Keywords: COVID-19, crisis, ecology, culture, poetics, Atlantic Canada, Canada-U.S. relations, locality

*Tes confins mes confins se confinent
Mais nos confins débordent le confinement*
[Your confines My confines do confine
But our confines exceed confinement]
Michel Deguy, Coronation, 2020¹

In the Covid. At some point in the past few weeks it dawned on my wife and on me that she has been pretty consistently saying “in the Covid” to refer to this time of confinement, de-confinement and beyond. For example, asking someone, “Have you been doing a lot of reading (or walking, or cooking, etc.) in the Covid?” Ever-attentive, as I think we should be, to the ways that prepositions shape our being-in (or toward) -the-world, I have come to really like this slightly idiosyncratic

turn of phrase. Saying ‘in’ instead of ‘during’, using “The Covid” as shorthand for so many other ways of designating the disruption and anxiety and the undeniable gifts of the past five months — this puts us into a more immediate, more immersive relation to the changed character of habits and interactions and at the same time, through its demotic or regionalist tone, establishes a more distanced and preciously light-hearted positioning with respect to the uncertain situation.

A resonant situation. The association of the terms ‘resonance’ and ‘situation’ came to me spontaneously and intuitively as both a title and a challenge. I think the resulting expression stands up fairly well to scrutiny from a number of practical and theoretical angles and it permits me to enter into the “movement of resonance” so beautifully evoked in the invitation for contributions from *Inter Faculty*. These brief and fragmentary remarks seek to establish some kind of harmonic or quasi-harmonic relation to global realities from a local perspective. In their tonal or atonal resonation (much will depend on the character of others’ contributions) these observations – be they theoretical or empirical, personal or scholarly, grave or humorous – also express a very specific situation and situatedness; they might even function retroactively as a kind of diary, otherwise unkept.

Think locally, act globally. The journal’s editorial board has conceived this number as a resonant interaction of global academic voices in the humanities. I bring the perspective of someone living and working in an area of the world that has largely avoided the worst ravages of COVID-19, namely Atlantic Canada, at the north-eastern edge of the North-American continent.² But the relative current security of this politically, geographically and culturally definable locality in no way implies any merely complacent distance from the wider woes. Indeed, and this is a kind of supplementary proof of the generalizability and contagiousness of the global phenomenon underway, here too the laboratory of experience and speculation, analysis and solution has been working at full capacity, generating its figures and models, its own disparate fears, catastrophes real and imagined, and persistent or nascent hopes.³

The current phenomenon. Whatever thoughts I can muster come necessarily from the specific disciplinary perspective and recent reading of a scholar and teacher of contemporary French literature and of Canadian Studies, but necessarily too from the point of view of someone who is, like all of us, a generalist – an observer-citizen

and a reader of what we could call in French *le phénomène en cours*, the phenomenon underway. That current phenomenon is of course COVID-19 itself but it must be understood as gathering in and expressing the possible meanings and orientations of the prolonged and generalized crisis with which the first decades of the twenty-first century have been, are, and will inevitably continue to be preoccupied. The societal shifts which we have been invited to contemplate and to comment upon here remain stubbornly obscure – deeply rooted and superficially agitated, motivated and impelled by historical and civilizational developments operative over the very long term, but frequently manifesting themselves as sudden, unexpected, arbitrary events, coming with the shock of disagreeable surprise. The contagion is a very apt figure of that general logic and experience of mutation.

Mutation. In using this term, I am thinking of and alluding to Michel Deguy's ongoing work on poetics and ecology, a strong current of his abundant *oeuvre* which grew out of the conception and practice of a 'geopoetics' from the 1960s onward.⁴ More than four decades of poetic work have culminated in a fully engaged and focused ecopoetics, most intensely expressed in a series of recent books – *La Fin dans le monde* (2009), *Ecologiques* (2012) and *L'envergure des comparses* (2017). In this thinking, which builds upon decades of poetic theory and practice, Deguy articulates an ecological preoccupation and anxiety with a broader sense of cultural transformation that is total in character, a mutation that is already well underway and carrying us along at an increasing pace. As Deguy says in the already-cited poem of Coronavirus, “*Mondialisation et pandémie font connaissance/ Et ne se quitteront plus*” [Globalization and Pandemic get acquainted/And become inseparable].⁵ In a certain way, this is just a more rhetorically sophisticated version of the very many current commentaries prophesying the end of globalization. But its deep poetics ground the anxiety in the relation to the earth more fundamentally than in questions of international relations, the fate of national economies or the complications of trade.

The Absolute Necessity. While walking the Halifax waterfront connecting here to elsewhere, trying to think the being of the event, I am also thinking of the late Bernard Stiegler⁶ and in particular of the last book he published before his passing this August, *Bifurquer* (2020). This collective work published under his editorial direction and intellectual inspiration explicitly draws a link between the pandemic and what he and the collective Groupe Internation take to be the vulnerable and

menacing obsolescence of our dominant socio-economic model. Stiegler's remarkable power of synthesis makes his thought a formidable tool for any serious consideration of our moment – whether one can accept the full radicality of his call for transformation through a new macro-economic model or whether one turns away from its exigent implications out of philosophical disagreement, simple fear of the unknown, disbelief, comfort, genuine hopefulness or intellectual weariness. Stiegler's deeply and originally theorized characterizations of the apogee of globalization today (*passim*) as the ultimate consequence of modernity's near total transformation of the biosphere into a technosphere, and his urgent pleas to detoxify our relation to the carbon and silicone economies (pleas driven by concern for the integrity of the *oikos* and the locale, for workers' dignity in a post-proletarian understanding of precarious work, for the psychic well-being of billions of individuals caught in an idleness without meaning, form or reliable truth, trapped in the oppressive, attention-destroying, dopamine drive of internet, social media, pornography, online shopping, with their attendant echo chambers, algorithmic manipulation and nudging) are stringent, striking and quite explicitly revolutionary. He displaces the concern for the 'Anthropocene' (cf. the 2018 film by that name by Baichwal, de Pencier and Burtowsky) toward a conception of the 'Entropocene' (derived from entropy) more adequate to the full complexity of the anthropy today, in a strident call to avoid *in extremis* what he takes to be looming ecocide and concomitant human suicide. "In these times of grave perils it is necessary to bifurcate. This is the absolute necessity." (Stiegler 2020: 12)

To Bifurcate. How to navigate the uncertainties of the future amidst the widely divergent points of view of radical Bifurcators, resigned Never-the-Samers, V-shaped-economic-recovery Optimists and well-intentioned Build-Back-Better Activists? How to account for the urgent surge of social movements and demands for justice that have coincided with the worldwide lockdown/slowdown? These demanding questions have both collective and individual dimensions. How to negotiate in a singularity the demands for human universality revealed by and during this pandemic, revealed "in the Covid"? Put differently, as another title of Bernard Stiegler's has it, *Dans la disruption Comment ne pas devenir fou?* [In Disruption How not to go mad?] That is a serious question for all individual and collective actors; I certainly see it on my frequent walks in the streets of my city where the precarious position of some is spilling over into more and more obvious episodes of distress, of pent up low-level violence and an ambiance of disarray

(all of which coexist with a unique moment of ease in this beautiful summer for those of us whose jobs and incomes are not yet too dramatically affected and who gather in careful clusters on outdoor patios and at restaurants, on pleasure craft in the harbour, distancing more or less effectively and carefully masking up at appropriate times, good citizens all, living this privileged moment with a special intensity). “All in the same storm but not all in the same boat”, as one local columnist puts it (Lethbridge 2020). The moral demands of this disruption are, we might say, infinite. Given our constraints here I can only emphasize two dimensions of the question, two courses that might be roughly plotted on the chart, among so many other necessary and difficult-to-discriminate ones: i. Bubbles and Borders and ii. Culture and Leisure.

Bubbles and Borders. Overheard – “Who have you been bubbling with”? (The poetic and rhetorical joys of the Covid are real.) The image-notion of a bubble has been used worldwide and the metaphorical possibilities of the bubble as they pertain to identity, migration, sovereignty, hospitality and other major vectors of the century are vast. A sustained analysis of the bubble from the point of view of Derridean auto-immunity suggests itself but can only be gestured at here. Put far too simply, self-preservation can only occur through the incorporation of difference, through working immunity against itself to avoid the certain death of perfect autarky and self-security. In the Canadian context this reflexive auto-immune opening-up (reopening is the consecrated term and we’ve seen it in all nations) has meant expanding from household bubbles to larger, more inclusive friendship and kin bubbles to, in the case of our region, an Atlantic Bubble allowing for free movement within the four easternmost provinces, while maintaining unprecedented public health precautions. The bubble, by definition a fragile thing, existing at the intersection of elements, a membrane articulating the inside and the outside, identity and difference, is a particularly difficult-to-grasp image when applied to a geography, both physical and political, in this way. The bubble’s resemblance to borders, bounds, confines is obvious enough and one of the widespread fears in these provinces is that of opening the borders to other Canadian citizens too early, bursting the bubble prematurely and allowing the contagion to begin circulating again in the community.⁷ Perhaps a general proposition derivable from this situation might be the following: COVID selves everywhere exist on the border, on multiple borders old and new, exacerbating differences that once seemed minor and downplaying differences that may prove to be major and even lethal.

The Border within and the Border without. While not underestimating the significance of improvised (and perhaps unconstitutional – the matter is before the courts) *cordons sanitaires* to protect the least affected parts of the country, in Canada's case, traditionally, the key question is always necessarily that of the international border and the relationship with the U.S.A. The matter of reopening the border with the United States is a constant preoccupation of Canadians from coast to coast to coast in the Covid, greatly relieved as we are and quite pleased with ourselves, too, for our better performance in containing the virus and determined to maintain the best and safest distance possible from the neighbours.⁸ The fact that the border has been closed except for essential travel in the very same year as a new North American Free Trade agreement was ratified – in the face of what seemed at times like impossible odds – is an ironic and disruptive statement about Canadian evolution, our history being very much, from a certain angle, the story of keeping the border tight (if famously undefended) until such time as our identity and unity were secure enough to open up more confidently and fully to the economic dynamism of the great Republic to the south. These interpretive paradigms and structural certitudes have been shaken by the past few months and seem ripe for re-evaluation.⁹ This will be a significant and potentially transformative cultural effort.

Otium... I'm using 'culture' in the previous paragraph in a very comprehensive sense, obviously. I want now, as a move toward conclusion, to adjust the focus and consider culture more narrowly in its traditional and contemporary associations with leisure. In spite of the real fears for life and livelihood, in spite of the anguished concern for loved ones near and far and the many disappointments at abandoned projects and travels, in spite of interrupted cherished habits of sociability, COVID time did and does open up a vast horizon of leisure time as so many people moved into a version of lockdown, partial confinement or self-isolation. The constraint of working from home or of temporary lay-off or reduced workload could become in many cases an instrument of freedom and a liberator of energies. How many of us promised ourselves that we would read *In Search of Lost Time* or catch up on the entirety of *Game of Thrones*, or learn to sing or paint, or see the entire filmography of Akira Kurosawa? And how many confessional pieces on social media, how many confessions of friends have we heard bemoaning failure to attain these goals? A great many exceptions will be cherished when this is all over, no doubt, but a general characteristic of the pandemic, this epiphenomenon of disruption in

disruption, might well be a recognition that productive, studious and contemplative leisure is a habit hard to attain or regain. Stiegler, again: “In this transformation, *otium* (the time of productive leisure) is subjected to *negotium* (the business of the world)” (Stiegler 2020: 56)

The stance of the root and branch critic of globalization is here very close to a more conservative, but perhaps equally radical, tradition of valuing leisure for contemplation and for the good of the soul rather than for entertainment and distraction in their increasingly difficult-to-distinguish proximity with consumerism. In the context of the cancellation of the Canadian Football League’s 2020 season (and clearly taking a comprehensive definition of culture that includes amateur and professional sport and cultural and civic festivals) Father Raymond de Souza writes with real regret: “A common life that is stripped down to essential commercial activities is not living so much as it is mere existing. Man does not live by bread alone, as it was venerably said.” (De Souza 2020) There are two main points in his brief article: i. the loss of the habit of what Stiegler calls ‘productive leisure’ (or even more seriously the closing off of the possibility of such habit), and ii. the diminishment of all of our cultural practices (high and low, private and public, cultivated and popular, etc.) from the effects of extended isolation.

On the first point, there is a lot of evidence that the risk of COVID downtime (*covidotium*?), the other side of the ambitious programmes we may have set ourselves, is what the French call in one of their intriguing borrowing-displacements of English, *le blurring*. The inability to clearly distinguish work time from home, personal, leisure or cultural time afflicts us all to a greater or lesser degree, given the insinuation of so many technical devices and prostheses into our homes and onto our persons and given their ready accessibility at any moment. The Catholic priest and thinker of today falls back on the twentieth century scholastic philosopher Joseph Pieper and his famous work, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture* (1952/2009), to make the point in his way: “Pieper saw that leisure – time apart from work – was to be devoted to those pursuits which tend to elevate, to perfect and to give meaning to our lives. He argued that if we get leisure wrong, we are likely to get work wrong, and life wrong.” (in De Souza 2020). Getting leisure wrong, getting work wrong, getting life wrong. This is the same litany of concern expressed in his own very singular language of *technics* by the late Bernard Stiegler. (A possible project would consist of considering together what

Pieper meant by “deproletarianization and the opening of the world of leisure” in his Cold War context and what Stiegler, the thinker of the *extreme contemporary* [as Michel Deguy puts it], does with the same notion/term in the context of the coming of the technosphere.)

De Souza (2020) – in no militant way, he is no ‘anti-masker’ or extreme libertarian COVID-denier of the U.S. American sort – allows himself nonetheless a poignant note of felt concern for the consequences of isolation and a restrained call for responsibility and courage: “Cultural life cannot recover when the whole public health thrust is to keep people apart from each other. No culture can be built on a mandate to isolate.” I think this is what Deguy’s *Coronation*, with which we began, says too, in its densely compacted way: “Our confines exceed confinement”. There is no culture but a culture of the other, of the outside, of risk taken.

The emphatic and simple turn of phrase, ‘lack of mandate’, with its democratic and psycho-spiritual overtones, seems to be just what haunts us in our current waiting and in our uncertainty. This lack with all of its implications has a particular character, it defers, alters or negates our building and our *bildung*, our leisure-pleasure, our education and our project-formation. The head of the United Nations has spoken of a ‘generational catastrophe’ for education and I know that I feel a pang every time I meet a former student whose endeavours have been cast into doubt and whose life is on hold (see Gigova and Howard 2020). *Avoir 20 ans en 2020* [20 years old in 2020] is the title of a series in the French newspaper *La Croix* and we will wonder about Generation COVID’s development for a long time, I fear. At all events, however we approach the massive challenges of what comes *after-COVID*, whatever it will mean in different ways the world over, the overcoming of what Stiegler (2003) calls *symbolic misery* must be on the programme.

¹ My translation. *Coronation* (Deguy 2020), the text from which these two lines are extracted was published in March as a ‘billet’ on the website of *Po&Sie*, the journal founded by Michel Deguy in 1977. The French poet-philosopher may be seen reading his text with a subtitled Japanese translation by Y. Nishiyama et M. Takakuwa (YouTube).

² The combined population of the three contiguous Maritime provinces (New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia) and adjacent Newfoundland and Labrador is approximately 2.2 million. There has been a total of 1,982 cases in this Atlantic region at the time of writing, with exactly seventy fatalities. It has been several weeks since any of the four provinces has recorded a case of community transmission.

³ Speaking of the specific juncture here in Atlantic Canada I cannot fail to mention the terrible events of April 19th-20th. The violence perpetrated that evening, night and into the next morning ranks as one of the

worse mass murders in Canadian history. Twenty-two victims and the gunman were killed. This rampage coloured the early weeks of the COVID-19 state of emergency in deeply troubling ways. Consider this a moment of silence.

⁴ I am grateful to Tsukuba University and to Professor Michiko Tsushima for allowing me to share my research on Michel Deguy and ecology in the quarterly Modern Languages and Cultures Forum on December 11, 2019. It was a very enriching experience. For those wishing to read more about Deguy's ecopoetics, see my article 'Motifs de l'écologie deguyenne: quelques propositions en guise de synthèse et de conclusion' (Elson 2019).

⁵ The following quotation gives a taste of this confluence in his thought:

What is something of a riddle today is the meaning of the "cultural" culture understood in its widest possible generality that I have been working for years to make understood: this epoch-making mastery of the whole "total social phenomenon" which, whatever its intentions, intrigues, manifestoes might be, will draw any work into the laws of globalization or market values, into the mutation which is underway, of which the globalized world "in crisis" is the instantaneous result. Can another transformation-mutation respond? An "ecological" mutation? (Michel Deguy 2012: 36-37), (my translation)

⁶ For an overview of Stiegler's work, see his obituary in *Libération* (Faure and Blin 2020).

⁷ The shift in strategy and attitude from an approach that in March, April and May was based on flattening the curve of the virus's spread, protecting vulnerable populations, and maintaining adequate capacity in the health care system for the feared major wave of infections to what is now clearly a more ambitious aspiration for no casualties and even no community spread has been a fascinating one to observe. Since health is a provincial responsibility in the Canadian constitutional order, this becomes also a matter of the working out of diversity in federalism. In this regard, *mutatis mutandis*, Quebec might be said to be something like a Canadian Sweden, prepared to live with higher risk, while the Atlantic provinces now aspire to maintain a standard of success that may be unequalled anywhere else in the world's wealthy pluralistic societies. The paradoxes and risks of auto-immunity may yet come into play.

⁸ 81 per cent of Canadians polled in early July were against reopening the border with the United States (see Janice Dickson's article in *The Globe and Mail*, July 6, 2020). Canadians must always guard against a certain smugness relative to the Americans when it comes to matters of civic responsibility and behaviour (our comparisons frequently stop on the North American continent where we tend to look our best in contrast, rather than taking a global view). For an account of the cultural differences behind the contrasting management of the pandemic from an American perspective, see Doyle McManus's article 'I'm in Canada, where the COVID police are watching' in the *Los Angeles Times* of August 5, 2020.

⁹ For a quick and accessible account of this logic from the 'before times', see Andrew Steele, 'Canada's Grand Strategy', in *The Globe and Mail* of October 3, 2010. For a hint of what the destabilization of this model implies, see the scholars of international relations Philippe Lagassé and Srdan Vucetic (2020).

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