

## The ‘World After’: On the Pandemic and the Anthropocene

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### Abstract

*This paper questions the link between the present pandemic and the ecological crisis. To do so, it tackles what has been an important issue in the recent discussion in Europe: what will the world look like ‘after’ the Covid-19 crisis? It argues that the crisis of the Anthropocene, linked to climate change, is indeed what will define our future. Yet it shows that the temporal frame in which this new world has to be imagined will defy our current understanding of politics. In this sense, the very idea that there is an unproblematic ‘after’ to the current epidemic crisis is anything but obvious.*

**Keywords:** pandemic, ecological crisis, anthropocene, temporality

The Covid-19 pandemic and the forms of lockdown it triggered on a global scale have, in their own way, suspended time. For those of us who were forced to stay home for weeks or months, this amounted to a bypassing of daily life: all that we had taken for granted, our most obvious things and rhythms, our sense of the world and of a regular temporality - all of this was suddenly abolished. As in times of mourning (Freud 2011), but also as in times of carnival (Bakhtine 1970), life as we knew it gave way to a mental landscape that was both familiar and deeply mysterious – the very landscape that characterizes our dreams and nightmares and that Freud (1933) once characterized as *unheimlich* (a word usually translated by ‘uncanny’ in English). This *unheimlich* world in which, it seems, we now have to inhabit, is also a world where the very idea of temporality has been profoundly reshaped. The “empty and homogeneous” time typical of our modernity (Benjamin 1983) - a time premised on the idea that past, present and future are clear-cut sequences - gave way to an amorphous time, a time “in tatters”. This is evidenced by the disarray that took hold of so many people in the past months, when faced with weeks in which all days were similar and in which the break

between day and night, between work and leisure, was increasingly difficult to maintain (for instance, see the testimonies in *Le Monde*, 2020).

It may therefore appear all the more paradoxical that the pandemic, during which time seemed to be abolished and to have collapsed on itself, was also the moment when a reflection on the future was rekindled - as if the abolition of daily temporality made it all the more necessary to think freshly about time and the continuity of life. From this emerged a theme that has structured - at least in the most affected countries of Europe such as France - an important part of the discussion: what will the 'next world' or the 'world after' look like? What politics and society will have to be rebuilt once the pandemic has receded? What will our lives be like once the transformations brought about by the disease have become a new normal? By asking these questions, citizens and intellectuals were invited to give shape to a life that did not yet exist but which a disease of exceptional dimensions suddenly made, if not possible, at least conceivable or desirable. The invitation was certainly an exercise in political imagination at a time when the capacity for actual collective and individual action was severely limited. It was typical of a reflection in a context of crisis, in the sense that crises are, etymologically, moments that call for a pronouncement on the reality and a reappraisal of its meaning (from the Greek *krinein*: to judge, to qualify). The analysis of what this reflection did eventually produce has yet to be done and will be one of the intellectual and political challenges of the years to come. We can only briefly indicate that it tackled several topics: for many, the pandemic did confirm a number of earlier intuitions (on the failure of capitalism, the weakness of multilateralism, the decline of the West and the ascending yet contested place of China, the erosion of democracies due to their internal inequalities, etc.), for some, and sometimes for the same people, it showed the necessity to reinvent a world that has to be more united, less consumerist and less dominated by the economy, while others responded to these utopian hopes by conjuring up the idea of a profoundly dystopian post-Covid-19 world, marked by tangled crises, increasingly authoritarian politics and the reign of alienating technologies.

Yet it is not on the content of these contributions that we would like to focus on in this paper, but on what the very idea of projecting oneself into the 'world after' implies. More precisely we intend to link this idea of the world after Covid-19 to another crisis that threatens humanity, that is to say the crisis created by the looming

ecological disaster. In this sense, we are dealing here with two questions: what is this 'after' we are referring to while the very idea of temporality appears to have come to a halt? In what way too, is the question of the post-pandemic world linked to the question of the anthropocene? As will be shown now, these questions are in fact partly related; they resonate, in any case, with each other in a particular way.

The link between the Covid-19 crisis and the environmental crisis has been stressed by many observers. These two events are a reminder of the extent to which crises have become structural and intertwined: the ecological disaster that has been threatening for several years is now being linked to a health crisis that risks aggravating this very ecological crisis. Not only are the roots of the ecological crisis partly those of the pandemic (the radical changes in the relationship of humanity to its natural environment is very likely one of the main causes of the current zoonoses), but the solutions that are being put forward today to get out of the many crises triggered by Covid-19 – chief among them the economic one – threaten to make the ecological crisis even more acute (especially if states seek to boost their economies). Moreover, the pandemic appears as a form of preparation or repetition of what the ecological crisis is likely to be in the more or less long term: radical upheavals in our living conditions, increasingly strong control of populations, restrictions on individual freedom imposed in the name of a higher common good, etc. – with the management of future crises being shaped in light of the past and current crises (Lakoff 2017).

However, the link between the Covid-19 crisis and the anthropocene crisis is not so obvious that a reading of the previous arguments might lead one to think. The idea was convincingly put forward by Bruno Latour (2020) in an article published by the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Here, Latour argued that the parallel between these two crises is only partially true. First of all, because the duration and severity of the current pandemic have nothing to do with those of the ecological crisis: in all likelihood, the Covid-19 crisis will not exceed a few months or a few years, whereas the climate change is a matter of decades, if not centuries or millennia. Moreover, Latour argues, each of these crises belongs to different political eras. The Covid-19 crisis is still typical of a twentieth century crisis, where national governments are in the front line in coordinating a response, sometimes with the help of international organizations. The environmental crisis, however, is of a different magnitude and appears to be the crisis of the coming century. No existing

government, however powerful it may be, can claim to have the skills or expertise needed to solve it (unlike the Covid-19 pandemic, which requires a vaccine or treatment, the very idea that there may be a solution to the ecological crisis is far from self-evident). The ecological crisis, in this respect, will require a form of coordination, a reinvention of politics, a redefinition of its modalities of action and their inclusion in a renewed understanding of temporality, which makes it an unprecedented event in total rupture with human history as we know it.

Relying on Latour, we can safely say that the coming world, which we have tried to imagine since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, will take the form of another crisis, that of an anthropocene where mankind's action on its natural environment threatens if not his very existence, at least the forms of modern social and political organization it has set up. The 'world after' is that of a coming crisis, the nature and complexity of which are unparalleled. But it is also a crisis that is temporally open, with no clearly assignable beginning or end (at least today), inscribed in a duration that defies our capacities of prediction. This is indeed a point put forward by Dispeh Chakrabarty (see Hache 2014) in a text that examines the flaws in the reasoning on the ecological crisis. Here Chakrabarty underlines our impossibility to apprehend this crisis in its temporal dimension. On the one hand, we apply to it a mode of reasoning typical of our political modernity: we seek to reduce uncertainty by turning it into a calculable risk that can be evaluated according to mathematical and economic procedures. In this sense, the ecological crisis becomes a process that we must try to manage by evaluating its duration, its costs, its consequences, etc. On the other hand, Chakrabarty points out that, in the case of the anthropocene, such a risk management policy is inoperative: it is impossible to predict the effects of human activity on the climate. These very effects are not linear and are defined by tipping points that make it difficult to envisage how global warming will materialize. In other words, we know that the climate is changing but we will probably never know exactly how it will change in 100, 1,000 or even 50,000 years.

This last remark by Chakrabarty brings us back to our starting point. The problem with thinking about the 'world after', in our view, is that we situate ourselves in a temporal framework that we take for granted and therefore do not question. The discussion goes as if there will necessarily, and non-problematically, be a time 'after' the pandemic. However, what is revealed by the current entanglement of crises and

the unprecedented nature of the climate crisis, is that this time is in fact anything but obvious. More precisely, it is an open, indefinite and indefinable time, with no limits or boundaries. The problem with the 'world after', in other words, is that one can never characterize this 'after' other than as an evasive temporality. The world after, in that sense, is both already here and will never be here. And because it is a necessarily elusive world, it tests our capacities for political imagination as few crises have done before.

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