

Surviving Pandemic and Lockdown At the Limit of life and Theory

Dear colleagues and friends,

I am very pleased to be here on this platform to share with you my thoughts about this tough period of our existence.

I'm talking to you from Rabat, the capital of Morocco, where the situation is far from being comparable to the one you're experiencing in Italy (and in Europe in general)... In general, the situation was brought under control fairly early, with the borders closed at the start of the second week of March. All shops have been closed, except for necessities (food and pharmacy). Total lockdown (i.e. exits must be justified by a document from local authorities) was ordered on March 13 and extended twice, until June 10.

This situation of lockdown during the pandemic is exceptional enough to experience and reflect on, as it challenges our relationship both to the *socius* and to the natural world. It puts us all in what is the condition of existence of millions of people and entire populations: those condemned by crippling diseases; women confined to their limited geographies for androcentric reasons; immigrants trapped by intolerant policies; political prisoners ramping in authoritarian regimes' jails; natives deprived of their living spaces and locked up in reserves; colonized populations confined in tiny and unbreathable territories. The pandemic and the lock-down teach us that our destiny is inseparable from theirs and that we must feel in our body and our mind what is forever theirs condition of existence – that we are not historical or anthropological exceptions. These conditions also demonstrate that our fate is inseparable from our environments and the non-human beings that inhabit them – including bacilli and viruses and all the pathogens that beset us.

The pandemic is not only about our present and future. It also plunges us into other times. In history: near and distant history. We then learn that our predecessors have faced similar situations and felt untouchable, they underestimated the seriousness of the event, they refused to accept the facts, they reacted tardily, then they're forced to lockdown, to social distancing, and some cases separation and exile. They also experienced economic crises, including tourism ruination. Then, deaths by thousands, causing health care crises. The dead were rapidly buried, without the presence of the beloved. Tribulation and Mourning. They realized that they were unprepared to face the pandemic, both at the individual and political level...Then they swore to keep the memory of what just happened, to keep awake the part of humanity in them, so as to be prepared for the next outbreak.

Yet they just remembered the time to forget their dead and rediscover their habits, their "liberties", their recklessness, thus forgetting not only what was their absolute vulnerability, their fragile human condition, but also those who are still the "confined" of the world – The wretched of the earth...

The Plague (La peste), Albert Camus's novel, accounts all of this, in a arresting way that penetrates the real, capturing what we are experiencing today, what others before us had experienced and what others after us will probably also experience. From the first day of lockdown, I got the idea to read this novel, feeling that I will surely find in a perceptive

fiction more reality, a resonance of what we are going through, probably more than in statistics and political speeches that usually erase the concreteness of the disease, of death and survival. Camus's literature of testimony, as Felman (1996) put it, is not an art of leisure but an art of urgency: it exists in time not just as a memorial but as an existential engagement, as an attempt to bring the backwardness of consciousness to the level of precipitant events.

The narrator in the novel, *La peste*, who is a doctor by profession, acts as a historian who gathered a considerable number of testimonies, his own testimony of course, then the others' confidences – it is as if the vocations of the doctor and the historian resonate with each other: that is, as a doctor, he wishes to preserve life and as a historian, he wishes to preserve events and their memories. The narrator decided to write the account, so as not to be one of those who keep silent, to bear witness on behalf of the victims, to leave at least a memory of the violence and injustice that was done to them, and to say simply what it is that one learns in the midst of such tribulations...

Here, the narrator's commitment meets, somehow, the writer's socio-political involvement. "The writer function", said Camus in his Nobel acceptance speech, "is not without its arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it". His role is to demolish the deceptive image of history as an abstraction (in which death becomes invisible) by bearing witness to the body. "In a civilization where murder and violence are already doctrines in the process of becoming institutions", and "where the executioners (perpetrators) have gained the right to become administrative managers," the writer, says Camus, is by vocation "Freedom's witness (le Témoin de la liberté), in that he testifies not to the Law, but to the body"¹.

In *The Plague*, Albert Camus emphasizes the significance of testifying and of keeping the memory of the deadly epidemic as a safeguard to protect against the coming outbreaks, and other scourges caused both by nature and human. For him, I would say, it is the only effective way to be prepared. Preparedness doesn't only refer to a pure medical and technical formulas, it implies a politically sensitive imagination and an anthropo-historical connectedness.

The *Plague's* narrator describes the amazement of a little town in colonial Algeria, Oran, which, so quiet until then, had been ravaged by pestilence in a few days... The all inhabitant of the town were unprepared, the doctor himself, as were the health system and the officials who, "lacking imagination, never rise to the challenge of a disaster – always lagging behind pandemics that hit and hit again". Here the fiction again meets the writer's convictions: "As everybody knows", writes Camus, "political thought today lags more and more behind events..."².

The inhabitants of Oran were mentally and psychologically unprepared and this is how one should understand their reluctance to believe that the symptoms shown by some sick people are related to bubonic plague. Before and after the authorities confirmed the epidemic, people's efforts were made to deny it, or, at least, to trivialize it:

¹ In Felman (1996).

² In (Felman 1996)

Pestilence is in fact very common, but we find it hard to believe in a pestilence when it descends upon us. There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared [...]. When war breaks out people say: “it won’t last, it’s too stupid.” And war is certainly too stupid, but that doesn’t prevent it from lasting. Stupidity always carries doggedly on, as people would notice if they were not always thinking about themselves. In this respect, the citizens of Oran were like the rest of the world, they thought about themselves; in other words, they were humanists: they did not believe in pestilence. A pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end. But it does not always end and, from one bad dream to the next, it is people who end, humanists first of all because they have not prepared themselves.

So the danger seemed unreal to the people of the plagued city. They thought that everything was still possible for them, which implied that pestilence was impossible. They continued with business, with making arrangements for travel and holding opinions. They considered themselves free and no one will ever be free as long as there is plague, pestilence and famine... The plague negates the future, negates journeys and debate... Hence the very plague should be negated.

The thoughts that resonate in the narrator’s head somehow reflect what happens in the minds of people when seized by the doubts of a potential plague. They try to put together in their mind what they knew about the disease. They thought that the thirty or so great plagues recorded in history had caused nearly a hundred million deaths. But what are a hundred million bodies spread through history, if not an abstraction, “a mist drifting through the imagination” – since a dead man has no significance unless one has seen him dead.

But when the doubts are dispelled, the plague confirmed and the gates closed, they all noticed that they “were in the same boat” and had to adjust to the fact, accepting therefore their status as prisoners. But even as confined persons, they continued to think that the plague was only an unpleasant visitor, which would leave one day as it had entered...

At the end of the epidemic, we feel this tension between, on the one hand, the tendency, almost natural, to forget what has just happened and to continue to act and live as before (as nothing had happened) and, on the other hand, the will, somehow engaged, to keep a vivid memory of what happened, in order to change things, to redefine political organization and social relationships.

Now that the plague was over, with its misery and privations, all these men had eventually taken on the clothing of the role that they had been playing for a long time...

Against all evidence they calmly denied that we had ever known this senseless world in which the murder of a man was a happening as banal as the death of a fly, the well-defined savagery, the calculated delirium and the confinement that brought with it a terrible freedom from everything that was not the immediate present, the stench (*la puanteur*) of death that stunned all those whom it did not kill.

Moreover, we also learn that some principle characters of the novel wondered whether the plague would or would not change the town; if the whole organization would be transformed and if, for example, all government's departments would be operating as in the past...

Thus the challenge after the epidemic is how survivors can continue to live fully but differently; how they can surpass the event while keeping alive the memory of their survival and their absolute fragility; how they can embody death so as not to reduce it to a "depersonalized experience", or to a "statistical abstraction". For that, they should realize that the epidemic is the "very shape of their lives", as even those who didn't have it, they should carry it in their flesh, hearts, mind and memory. And as Felman (1996) powerfully put it: "one has to learn on his body what a situation of total condemnation is: an experience that requires one to live through one's dying, and paradoxically, bear witness to that living through one's dying."

Indeed, as emphasized by the narrator, all that an individual could gain in the "game of plague and life" is "knowledge and memory": to have known the plague and to remember it; to have known friendship and solidarity and to remember it; to have known affection and to have one day to remember it; and to have known that the experience of survival is by no means in itself immune to a future outbreaks.

Thus, the crisis, of any kind, is (or should be) the framework for a historical apprenticeship and a sociopolitical change. In this sense, *La Peste* "exemplifies the problems of the human conscience in our time as the problems of a radical and necessary transformation: the radical and necessary transformation of the very categories of ethic and history" (Felman 1996). In other words, the crisis should serve to make the survivors "great", to think about the rest of this world's tribulations and confinement: for there is no longer any individual destinies, but a "collective history". And this whole greatness is not about heroism. It's about dignity, respect and decency.

The *Plague* story vividly reflects our reality today. I would especially like to underline two points: the connection between memory and collective destiny; the relationship between life and pandemic. In the novel, townspeople denied the very possibility of a pandemic because they saw themselves as a singular community, separated from history and from the world, and because they saw life, their own life, as a safe arena, separated from the savagery of nature (rats, bacillus, bubonic plagues)...

That is to say, the issue of unpreparedness is not only about politicality or technicality (biomedical or other), it is also, if not especially, about sensitive consciousness: that we are not historical or anthropological exceptions, that we're integral part of this world with its humans and non-humans (including bacillus, bacteria and virus)...

On the one hand, the disconnection with our histories and the others' realities disconnects us consequently from our own present reality and from the future and its unexpectedness. On the other hand, from an bio-anthropological point of view, the unfortunate disconnection established between humans and non-humans (or to put it another way between nature and culture), and on which the modern world has been founded, has considerably undermined our existence, making us increasingly alien to our natural world and the epitome of life. It is in this sense that I, personally, understand the Nietzschean

and Deleuzian notions of “becoming” and “othering”: “becoming-animal”, “becoming-plant”, “becoming mineral”, “becoming-imperceptible”. It is about bending the lines that separate and reduce the multitude of the world (the pluriverse), in order to create new spaces-time, new forms of life.

Our duty as anthropologists, ethnographers and and social theorists, is precisely to blur political and inter-specific boundaries and to examine more closely the metamorphoses of our modes of existence and thought and their socio-political potentials. In fact, it seems that the pandemic and its consequences on our lives could be a critical moment to initiate theoretical mutations that would be at the level of viral mutations – instead of being a moment of theoretical stagnation to corroborate already established theories and recall confirmed prescience. The articulation of new ways of life requires our own expansions towards cosmic existences, beyond anthropocentric moral ecology and beyond today’s globalized forms of existence whose essence is to level differences without experiencing them.

Our immunity lies on the fact of blurring these political and interspecies boundaries; and once the barriers are blurred, there will no longer be dangerous and deadly boundaries to spill over, but common experiences in life and death... In other words, our immunity (call it interspecific immunity if you wish) involves continuous metamorphoses – mutations to use viral language – of our modes of existence (being) and thought. In stead of taking the pandemic as an opportunity – as it happened – to confirm already established theories (certainly very important theories) and to recall a certain prescience, it should be, on the contrary, a critical moment to initiate theoretical mutations which would be at the height of viral mutations – not only at the level of political stagnation and toxicity.

It must be said that metamorphosis is not an abstraction. It is the concrete everyday experience of species, as it is the daily life of our experiences and biological lives: in anger, happiness, joy, sexuality, battlefields... reciprocal stimulation in crowds, murderous mobilizations...spiritual experiences... But also in concrete bodily transmutations, which in some circumstances are pushed to the limits of their actualization...

During the pandemic “confinement”, I often thought of a friend who had been confined in extreme conditions for 20 years.... Accused wrongly of having participated in a coup in 1972, he was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison by a military court. But two years later, he was secretly kidnapped at night, along with other detainees, and deported to a secret place of detention in the desert: Tazmamart. For 18 years, the inmates have to die slowly from torture, exhaustion, hunger, cold, heat and disease.

Isolated in a narrow and dark cell, my friend started a long and painful work of metamorphosis, which, at the end, saved his life. The first act he took was to “cut” himself from nostalgia, his personal past (what he was, the pleasant life he had outside). He even refused to ruminate on the fact that he was unjustly condemned by an authoritarian regime. He subverted the difference between outside and inside. He accepted his sentence, while transforming its meaning. And against the carceral power he opposed an ascetic Desire, internalizing suffering and decomposition with more abundance and sensibility.

He pushed the conditions of his confinement to the extreme, in order to empty the incarceration of its deadly meanings. He undressed (took off his clothes) to embrace the assassin cold (it was terribly cold during winters). He fasted to reconcile with hunger. He reconciled himself with illness and death:

The body can transcend the limits of tolerance by departing from fear. The true enemy is not the cold, but the fear of the cold. It is not disease, but the fear of disease. It is not even death, but the fear of death... I reconciled myself with disease and death. Death is the continuity of life. Death before life. Never dies whoever accedes to *Desire*".

As a subsequent movement of his metamorphosis, he undertook a bodily mutation, so that his body, the location of pain and on which the prison power is exercised, can deterritorialize the incarceration devices and their ends...

If we remain at the level of the first-body, we feel an atrocious pain, caused by the cold, hunger, lack of sleep, fear, isolation and darkness. If we reach the second body, we can no longer feel suffering... When you discover the second-body you escape confinement...

He then engaged in a combat, a destructive combat, not against the regime of confinement, but against his own body, his "first-body", starving it, exposing it to the cold and keeping it awake. He ruined, as he said, his "first-body" and from its ruins another body emerged, a "second-body", and which progressively get rid of the carapace that enveloped it and brook free. Like an animal moulting...

He says of his "second-body" that it is a "little animal". His becoming second-body is a becoming animal. A becoming non-human, which echoes his undressing, his resistance to hunger, to cold and heat, his reconciliation with death. Deleuze and Guattari (1975) describe an evocative signification of the becoming animal. These becomings, they write, represent an exit, a living line of flight, an intensive journey even on the spot or in the cage. The animal proposes to the human a means of escape that he or she cannot imagine. My friend's metamorphosis, his becoming small animal, exemplifies his communion with Nature. "Access to the second-body is access to *El-Kawn*". The *Kawn*, in Arabic, designates Nature, the Cosmos and the Universal, as if his body, becoming second-body (a small animal) met Nature in their interlacing, both beings becoming (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

I have to say that his corporeal metamorphosis has been carried by an embodied hybrid knowledge, certainly embedded in Islamic tradition (with its mystical idiom) but which was very open to other knowledge and wisdoms, including philosophy, yoga, Hinduism and Buddhism... That is to say, his corporeal and spiritual mutation is concomitant with a cultural othering (experiencing cultural and existential otherness), as if something akin to cultural mutation is occurring with the image of his bodily metamorphosis...

In other words, and to reiterate more generally the main idea of this talk: the ecological and sensitive connectedness to nature, *al-kawn*, (to the other forms of existence, animal or not) is inseparable from the process of cultural *othering* (becoming-other)...

Certainly, this is an account of a limit experience, at the limit of fiction. But as I said earlier, it is in these limit cases and in fiction that we learn more about ourselves, our existence, and about our promises...