

# *The Shifting Epistemological Horizon of the Pandemic*

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*The reaction to the pandemic has put in place some profound transformations. These transformations do not come entirely anew. They are rooted in the long-term process of oscillation between scientism and relativism. Yet, the fallout of the pandemic promises to work as a new global social regulatory system, different from the ones that predate it. Thereby, it preludes to a paradigmatic epistemological shift. I sketch out four dimensions of such a shift, which I refer to in terms of vectors, in order to emphasise the directional as well as orientational nature of such elements. A vector is a pattern of long-term and large-scale social change. It manifests as a historical configuration of power that organises the collective and individual activities of humans. The evolution of these four vectors designs trajectories of development. The four vectors of the shifting horizon of the pandemic are as follows: the normalisation of the colonial exception; the centrality of necro-politics as global technology of control; the displacement of uncertainty from the margin to the centre of the intersectional space between expert knowledge, political power and public opinion; the radicalisation of the word 'theory'.*

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In his juvenile *Essay on the Popular Errors among the Ancients*, the Italian early nineteenth-century poet, Giacomo Leopardi, amused himself by deriding some odd customs of the Greeks.<sup>1</sup> The citizens of Athens, including those thinkers that the Eurocentric narrative of modernity considers the putative fathers of philosophy and geometry, agreed upon the belief that it was not meaningless to foretell the future through the interpretation of sneezes. Yes; sneezes. If a lieutenant sneezed on his own right hand, the sneeze was a sign of bad luck in war. If a woman touched a

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baby after sneezing into her own fist, she sneezer could endanger the well-being of entire generations to come. Finally, in the unfortunate case of a traveller departing for a long journey after his or her skin had been fortuitously reached by someone else's droplets, the 'sneezed' was doomed to never return. In the history of medicine, there is no agreement whether this classical Greek oddity actually concealed the popular knowledge that the intersubjective transmission of illnesses, such as flu, cold, fever or sore throat, could take place through the sneeze. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon that the history of ideas registers how public health practices or behavioural norms formed the nutshell of complex systems of social regulation, whose inner expert logic took the public semblances of divination, necromancy or prophecy. In any case, foretelling the future has always been a tool for power to prescript without explaining. A powerful tool, able to create a fundamental relation between past, present and future: we know from yesterday, that if we act this way today, this will happen tomorrow.

To be sure, proto-biological understandings of the mechanisms of contagion that ignore the existence of microorganisms proved by the invention of the microscope at the turn of the seventeenth century are in fact the taken-for-granted explanations that the bulk of historians and anthropologists have regularly applied to whatever indigenous, pre-modern and early-modern form of knowledge. This approach to the non-modern as a whole, against the backdrop of what is modern, has efficiently worked throughout the entire construction and implementation of the colonial matrix of power in modernity (Quijano, 2007). It consists in what Fabian (1983) had defined the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous. That is, the epistemological ethnocentric manoeuvre that simultaneously displaces the non-modern into another time and the non-western into another space, therefore allowing hegemonic power to negate the coexistence of multiple understandings of what true knowledge is and is not. In other words, the ethnocentric solution to Kant's demarcation problem projected onto the global history of the world and constantly reproduced through the coloniality of method, which consists of the ability to mortify the transformative potential of the colonial difference both historically and epistemologically. It incorporates asymmetries of power into categories of analysis whose colonial construction is made invisible by dissolving into apparent conceptual and terminological transparency (Ascione, 2016, p. 7).

Yet, the turmoil of tentative understandings, contrasting certainties and sudden reversals, which the organised reaction to the outreach of the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought about from 2020 onwards, exposes the fragilities of this fundamental Eurocentric mechanism. Therefore, it discloses new horizons that social scientists are called to address.

Sneeze after sneeze, droplet after droplet, the future that the social sciences foresee is still somehow obscure. Nevertheless, the reaction to the pandemic has put in place some profound transformations. These transformations do not come entirely anew. In part, they are rooted in the long-term process of oscillation between scientism and relativism. Yet, the pandemic promises to work as a new global social regulatory system, different from the ones that predate it. Thereby, it

preludes to a paradigmatic epistemological shift. I sketch out four dimensions of such a shift, which I refer to in terms of vectors, in order to emphasise the directional as well as orientational nature of such elements. A vector is a pattern of long-term and large-scale social change. It manifests as a historical configuration of power that organises the collective and individual activities of humans. The evolution of these four vectors designs trajectories of development. The four vectors of the shifting horizon of the pandemic are as follows: the normalisation of the colonial exception; the centrality of necro-politics as global technology of control; the displacement of uncertainty from the margin to the centre of the inter-sectional space between expert knowledge, political power and public opinion; the radicalisation of the word ‘theory’.

### **The Normalisation of the Modern/Colonial Exception**

The absolute power to establish exceptions to norms is quintessential to the State and other jurisdictional authorities in the modern world. According to Carl Schmitt’s classical formulation, the normal constitutional procedures that regulate the life of a single State can be suspended, whereas a condition of emergency threatens the existence of the State itself (Schmitt, 2003). Therefore, the exception is the fundamental postulate of the norm. Exception sets out the condition of possibility for norms. This notion of exception was profoundly Eurocentric. It was born after the Second World War, to make sense of European nation-states machineries and their conflicting imperial forces. For this reason, Partha Chatterjee (2017) has provided a different understanding of exception, from the vantage point of the post-colonial nation-state. Chatterjee maintains that the colonial exception is the suspension of a global norm in the exceptional circumstances of an empirically deviant country. The examples of this external colonial exception, according to Chatterjee, are many and less and less limited to the former Third World countries. Among these, are the veto power within the Security Council of the United Nations, the perpetual recolonisation of Israel in the Palestinian territory, the recovery package of structural adjustment imposed on Greece and the simultaneous acceptance of further public debt accorded by the EU to France and Italy.

In this context, the pandemic has transformed the authority to suspend the norm by declaring the exception into a global structure of power that merge Schmitt and Chatterjee’s views. The state of emergency that accompanies the COVID-19 pandemic extends in time: it marks the passage from event to duration. The rules that dramatically transform previously existing regulatory systems and jurisdictional assets derive their legitimacy from super-national authorities such as the World Health Organization. These rules are imposed on citizens by the singular states, in ways that variate to such an extent from region to region and during short time-spans that create a schizophrenic mosaic of numerous exceptions. In so doing, normality becomes distorted, and the exception becomes the only certain horizon of normativity, the only rule. The normalisation of exception further disempowers post-colonial subjectivities in

front of global, national or local institutions, in ways that deserve careful analysis and critique.

### **The Centrality of Necro-Politics as Global Technology of Control**

The pandemic re-establishes the centrality of death that was at the origin of the construction of the proto-epistemology of western social sciences, in their early purpose to serve the ruling classes of the emerging institution of the modern state, through the quantification of social change (Porter, 1996). Quantifying was important in order to render the decision-making process more effective and generalised (Latour, 2010). Statistics, in Europe in general and within the context of the rising British colonialism in Ireland in particular, was born in a specific historical and social context: the periodical resurgence of plague. The politician, insurance man and colonial landlord William Petty (2019) was the first thinker to pave the way for the foundation of the science devoted to the quantification of the social, which he named Political Arithmetick. His database, for establishing causal correlations between death, illness, social classes, gender, age, area of the city and other variables, was made after the appropriation of the data model of the so-called bills of mortality: a detailed list of deaths that the city of London periodically published to monitor the evolving situation during the epidemics and respond to public health emergencies (Neurath, 1994). Petty used this proto-demographic knowledge to speculate over the profitability of lands in homeland, in neighbour countries as well as and in the colonies of his time (mainly Ireland and New Zealand), and advice insurance companies about possible margins for new businesses, which betted on the expectation of mortality.<sup>2</sup> This early and original push to quantitative social science has thrived beneath the surface of the evolution of the structures of knowledge in the modern colonial world. Now, with the spread of the pandemic, it has become clear that the entire process of political decision is centred on the statistical ‘truths’, deriving from counting and recounting dead bodies. The way deaths are counted or associated with, rather than with other causes, is the main territory of a clash between challenging visions; therefore, it enforces or weakens positions of power. Based on these numbers, new systems of behaviour that bodies are allowed to perform have been produced, legitimated and imposed.

These rules have redesigned the borders of freedom and self-determination of every individual body. Achille Mbembé has grasped the social construction of such a border through the concept of *necropolitics*. Necro-politics copes with the inability of either the Eurocentric views of Giorgio Agamben (1998) or Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics to fully come to terms with the colonial worlds (Foucault, 2010). Necro-politics generally consists of the technology of social control of the post-colonial State to establish how people can live and how they have to die. The colonial subject, Mbembé and Meintjes (2003) explain, is less and less sovereign upon his or her body than the coloniser subject actually is or has been. Today, this condition that marked a sharp difference between the

coloniser and colonised looks much more nuanced: the body as we knew it undergoes profound processes of resignification that imply newly conceived spheres of State competence in the realm of the individual body. The early positivist dream of transforming the singular existing person into a single countable and controllable unit becomes real today. This dream comes together with the epistemological conflation between the individual body and the social body made up of the sum of individuals, yet enjoying a superior, superorganic condition: a single contagious body is a threat to the entire social body. Therefore, this shift reinforces and supports the State's enforcement of public health policies under the regime of the response to the pandemic. Eventually, the necropolitical essence of State power across both sides of the colonial border is exposed.

### **The Displacement of Uncertainty from the Margin to the Centre of the Space between Expert Knowledge, Political Power and Public Opinion**

Expert knowledge shares with public opinion the condition of uncertainty it faces in front of the future development of the pandemic. This looks like a novelty compared to other styles of communication that the ruling power has regularly adopted in front of subjects and citizens in other circumstances where an emergency had been declared with such strength. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries trust in expert knowledge enjoyed the ideologically supported from the aura of complete self-confidence that political power mirrored and showed in front of public opinion. Today, political power adopts an analogous strategy of legitimisation even though openly declares the subalternity of politics to science, even though the scientific community openly shows up uncertainty in the space of debate in the public sphere. In the current situation, this results in both expert knowledge and policymakers sending ambiguous messages to citizens: on one hand, they admit they do not have a full understanding of the dynamics they are called to manage; on the other hand, they ask for unquestioned trust in the decision they take and the analyses such decisions are based upon. The paradox is that the centrality of uncertainty comes together with citizens and subjects having to share the perception to have more tools of understanding to make informed decisions. In terms of power relations, this paradox designs a new set of political technologies of control whose efficiency needs to be fully understood in the long run. In terms of epistemological turn, this shift marks the displacement of *certainty* from the position of dialectical counterpart into the debate about certitude and truth within the understanding of science dominated by the reliability of the scientific method that emerged in western thinking during the seventeenth century (Bala, 2012). Moreover, the relocation of *uncertainty* to the crucial regulative epistemological pillar of the organised response to the pandemic. In more specific epistemological terms, Werner Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy in quantum mechanics, as well as Ilya Prigogine's plea for the end of certitude in the realm of thermodynamics, pass from the attack against

the dominant paradigm based on classical mechanics to the core notions of a new emerging paradigm (Wallerstein, 1996). The political authority accorded to such a paradigm of uncertainty increases while simultaneously its epistemological authoritativeness decreases. The core of such an emerging paradigm looks characterised by the suspension of the social relevance of causal explanation: it does not matter how exactly the pandemic was born, in what circumstances and for whom responsibility; only its outcomes are relevant. Such a condition materialises the nature intrinsically conjectural of the Scientific method, which Paul K. Feyerabend (1975) grasped in its *Against Method*, where he anchored the validity of any epistemology of science to the ever-changing conditions of history and the power relation they entail.

### **The Radicalisation of the Word: ‘Theory’**

In every age of epistemological turmoil, the word ‘theory’ loses its etymological sense and acquires a historical meaning. The Greek word θεωρέω (to theorise) ceases meaning the abstract process of observation and tells the story of the group of individuals who were called by the historical circumstances to leave the city and pay a visit to the oracle, in order to ask for news about the future. These were the θεωρός (theorists). The age of transition is the pure age of prophecy. During the age of transition, more than any other historical period, analyses do not simply explain: they influence actions, choices, facts and processes, by informing that generative, essential yet fragile space that is human thought, even though not necessarily in the direction needed, wanted or hoped. The pandemic shows how social theory is equally distant both from being universal and from being understandable exclusively within modern/colonial/western/ethnocentric categories of its own. Its ways of establishing logical causal relations between present, past and future acquired their adequacy within a specific historical configuration of power. The current historical conditions wherein social theory is produced expose the fragile foundations of this power. The possibility for the words theory and theorists to re-signify themselves calls for radically re-interrogating their engagement with politics, starting from the critique of the changing condition wherein knowledge is produced.

In so doing, social scientists must resist two extraordinary forces. The first is the seducing chant of the sirens in public debate that expects them to justify their very existence by producing ready-made answers to prime-time questions formulated in common-sensical language. The second is the revenge of methodological nationalism, that is, the sudden return to uncritically accepting the nation-state as a privileged unit of analysis regardless of the transnational nature of the pandemic itself and the global context of action it has immediately drawn. Methodological nationalism strikes back. Because of that, social scientists’ analytical ability is constrained by the tendency to inscribe the phenomena and processes produced by the pandemic within the political and geographical boundaries of every single state. This is paradoxical: the limited boundaries of the nation-state are expected

to set the epistemological conditions of possibility to answer the questions placed by the pandemic that, in fact, are intrinsically planetary and simultaneous for social theory as a whole. Yet, this paradox, if not addressed, has an outcome: it ends up supporting and legitimating the myopia of current political decision-making approaches.

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### NOTES

1. The book was published posthumously in 1842, under the rubric 'Volume 4' of his *Operas*.
2. The full title of the Political Arithmetick is Political arithmetick, or, A discourse concerning the extent and value of lands, people, buildings...as the same relates to every country in general, but more particularly to the territories of His Majesty of Great Britain, and his neighbours of Holland, Zealand and France.

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