

Letters against Separation – Claire Fontaine in Italy

■ Frontpage

ClaireFontaine 8 Mar '20

A. Was I ill? Have I recovered? Has my doctor been discovered? How have I forgotten all?

B. Now I know you have recovered: Healthy is who can't recall.

—F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882

[Viruses] remind us, as St. Francis did, that we humans are inseparable from the natural world. In fact, there is no “natural world,” it’s a bad and artificial phrase. There is only the world. Humankind is part of that world, as are the ebola viruses, as are the influenzas and the HIVs, as are Nipah and Hendra and SARS, as are the chimpanzees and bats and palm civets and bar-headed geese, as is the next murderous virus—the one we haven’t yet detected.

Or, as Quammen reflects after Prosper Balo shares a treasured notebook listing the names “Apollo,” “Cassandra,” “Afrodita,” “Ulises,” “Orfeo,” and other Ebola-felled apes: “People and gorillas, horses and duikers and pigs, monkeys and chimps and bats and viruses: We’re all in this together.”

—Claire Panosian Dunavan, *The Tropical Bookshelf: This Zoonotic World*, 2013

We live in a risk economy that has created a risk society.

Risk is unevenly distributed, but this seems to be just another experience of life under liberal democracies. We also take risks on a daily basis that have little to do with our own choices and our personal freedom: our jobs and our income are insecure, unions aren’t there to protect us, organizing has become dangerous, demonstrating can be physically harmful and result in the loss of a body part or our freedom, our rent can rise, so can the prices of essential goods (and they do), our neighbourhoods can become unaffordable because of gentrification. And where we had welfare, now there is austerity, cuts and more risks. Since the 2008 crisis we know that banks were gambling with our money. Saving money is risky, investing it is too and not having it puts us in the spiral of debt where any inconvenience turns into a disgrace. Against the terrorist threat, nation-states have come up with a new surveillance capitalism based on the state of exception, which creates new dangers under the pretext of protecting us. This has provided an important antecedent to what is happening these days.

Because for the first time nation-states have decided that their citizens *can’t take risks*. In the name of Covid-19 our lives have been taken away. We are all locked in our homes, with whatever and whoever is in them: the disabled child, the elderly parent, the violent husband. Social distancing means that every woman is bound to endless housework and exponentially more likely to suffer a violent death or injury. Every woman must home-school her children and care for whoever is in need, physically or emotionally, because this is what she was doing before being locked in her house and now she can no longer have help from outside. It is beautiful to hear that people discover gems whenever the individual, de-socialised pre-epidemic situation allows them a comfortable retreat with a pleasant family, but this is no help to the rest of us who tried everything precisely to escape the normality that makes these lockdown days bearable. Electronic entertainment, the precious world of simultaneous isolation and mesmerizing idiocy become useful and even essential in the moment when the news spew the opposite of information: death tolls, contradictory instructions, no scientific facts, psychological or legal advice about what we are going through. Just orders to follow. And it’s appalling how much digital content is now free of charge—why was it for profit to begin with?

It’s important, but not easy, to stay out of depression and be angry, because we are paying the price of austerity: we can’t be cured, can’t afford to be sick, therefore we can’t afford to live. “The coffin outside, the TV inside” as Vaneigem¹ brilliantly puts it, we are being enjoined to still work remotely in an Orwellian nightmare that disregards entirely the biological situation of lockdown. Tasks such as shopping for groceries or medication may take five times as long as usual; housework and childcare will claim the rest of the day for men and women alike. Writing and concentrating become a challenge. Thinking clearly without walking outdoors or touching anyone for weeks must have an unacknowledged impact on anyone’s productivity: being connected to the internet cannot be a guarantee of being able to deliver, and deliver what exactly?

Which professional world will be awaiting the ones who have so far kept their jobs, some savings and haven’t ended in deep poverty? And yet anger is illegitimate and shameful when compared to the conditions of doctors and nurses and to the ones who have lost loved ones and cannot say goodbye to them or hold them for one last time.

But then how is it possible to accept that in a globalized world where viruses travel at light speed from one continent to another, every government was so unprepared after watching Italy’s crisis, delaying social distancing in all the other countries, proclaiming the doubtful dogmas of herd immunity for a virus whose behaviour no one grasps yet, pretending it will just vanish or that we all must make sacrifices because we are going through a war? (And why would the war start now? This is just *another* battle, *another* carnage.)

A capitalism that has been putting the world at risk of perishing from pollution, deforestation, suffocation of the oceans, incineration of the forests, brutal exploitation of everything alive, suddenly has come to an obedient halt because the nation-state says so. The sickness of the planet, the anger of the Friday for the Climate, Extinction Rebellion, the human and economic costs of natural disasters didn’t alter business as usual, they were contained with military force and ignored. Three years of bloody ceaseless struggles all around France had left in January 2019, according to *Libération*, 144 demonstrators seriously injured (numbers have grown undocumented since). A serious injury, the journalists clarify, is defined as “torn body parts, organs having lost their functionality, bones fractured, feet and legs penetrated by fragments of grenades, severe burns, but also open wounds on the head.”²

And yet we experience these days a new temporality that is uncannily familiar to many of us. Slowness, low productivity, home schooling and preparing one’s own food were already the daily life of most of the people we know. We just got stripped of all freedom and the possibility of getting together in order to make precisely this way of life sustainable. What happens to empathy during lockdown? What happens to the empathy with the sick? To mourning? What happens to desire? According to Preciado, “In this new reality, those among us who had lost love or who had not found it in time—that is before the great mutation of COVID19—were doomed to spend the rest of our lives totally alone.”³ And younger generations already ill at ease with the un-photogenic reality of bodies might become germophobic and accustomed to consider other people’s physiology as a revolting menace, the proximity of their breathing, the droplets in the air as threats. Going to the cinema, to the theatre, traveling for leisure and simply living a collective life might forever lose their appeal under an induced mass hypochondria.

In “Why Social Distancing Won’t Work for Us,” OluTimehin Adegbeye merrily goes on to describe daily life in Lagos: shared facilities, communal kitchens and bathrooms, crowded nights outdoors, impossibly packed public transportation. “Social distancing is a valid containment solution for the novel coronavirus, yes,” she writes. “But it is a solution that doesn’t grasp a reality that is extremely widespread across Africa: people survive difficulty by coming together as a community of care, not pulling apart in a retreat into individualism.”⁴

And there is indeed something disgusting in saving one’s ass by wearing makeshift protective gear to venture into a newly dangerous world where we need to keep two meters apart from any supermarket shopper or rare passer-by. As Agamben correctly noted, it’s a life reduced to animal survival: “Humans have grown so used to living in conditions of perennial crisis and perennial emergency that they don’t seem to realize that their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and it has lost every dimension, not only social and political but even human and affective.”⁵

Meanwhile the biological connection between humans has exploded; if empathy doesn’t travel through us, diseases do, they cross our bodies and blow up all the illusions of separateness. The continuity that we refuse to see from one class to another, from men to women to trans, is physiological. The Marxian human community shows its biological foundation that is borderless and classless. The separate pockets carefully built to keep people outside of society reveal their total continuity with our lives: the hospital, the prison, the refugee camp are part of the shared fabric of the world. Has Covid-19 highlighted the fragility of the human condition and our universal need to be loved and cared for? The BBC reported from Idlib a discussion with a resident of the camp: “Let’s face it: we don’t have running water, we can’t wash our hands.”

The regime of scientific abstraction has been extremely disappointing when trying to become knowledgeable about Covid-19. A virus that can be unexpectedly deadly, mild in some cases and totally asymptomatic in others, sounds like a bad joke. At the beginning of the third week in lockdown, magical materialism began to make total sense. We needed a synesthetic, physical and emotional understanding of what was unfolding. The very tie between our bodies and the blooming plants outside was the key to not panic: as a civilization we are behaving in ways that cause nature to be mechanically fruitful, deaf to its messages, enigmas, signals that resonate deeply with our own organisms and the ones of other species. The clear skies over Wuhan, the turquoise Venice canals, and the dolphins near Cagliari are manifestations of this momentary change of human habits, but so are the starved wild animals invading backyards and the hungry stray cats and dogs left without thrash to consume. What we eat was once alive, even if we are vegetarians. “We should demand,” says Rob Wallace in a recent interview, “food systems to be socialised in such a way that pathogens this dangerous are kept from emerging in first place.” As long as we don’t do it “the damages are so extensive that if we were to return these costs onto company balance sheets, agribusiness as we know it would be ended forever.”⁶

Claire Panosian Dunavan wrote in 2013:

There’s no denying our 21st century fascination—both mordant and self-protective, with emerging, zoonotic infections. My epiphany came while reading Karl Taro Greenfeld’s book on SARS. In my Los Angeles Times review of *China Syndrome: The True Story of the 21st Century’s First Great Epidemic*, I tried to depict the fragile boundaries between human, animal, and viral wildlife. “Picture Guangdong province, circa 2002—land of luck and prosperity,” I began. “‘To get rich is glorious,’ Deng Xiaping had proclaimed years earlier, opening the door to a new era of enterprise. Now, in China’s south, music blares, cell-phones ring, cigarette smoke curls, and tycoons flush with cash consume every kind of exotic meat from camel hump to pangolin ear. The growing passion for ‘Wild Flavor’ cuisine has spawned a flourishing trade. In crowded warehouses, slaughter chambers, and restaurant kitchens slimy with entrails and excreta, hundreds of caged creatures destined for affluent diners nervously await their fate.” Welcome to the riotous breeding ground of severe acute respiratory syndrome, an infection that will soon species-jump from animals to people.⁷

Epidemics have a narrative structure, they generate legends and stories with signs and symptoms to decipher. The effects they have on each person are stories with happy endings, or the end of everything. We have a “*history*” of some condition or vulnerability. It’s by keeping a *memory* of the first encounter with the virus that an organism becomes immune.

In 1936 René Leriche—at the time of the Spanish flu hecatomb—declared that health is the silence of the organs. So we listen.

And the body, unaware of the pandemic, doesn’t speak, it’s not building any defences, it doesn’t see anything coming. We don’t either. Nor does the patient zero, asymptomatic and contagious, the innocent traveller spreading death and pain on his careless path. Like the toxic male does through his emotional life.

He didn’t realize, did he really cause that?

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NOTES

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, “Coronavirus,” notbored.org → .

² “La carte des gilets jaunes gravement blessés,” *Libération* → .

³ Paul B. Preciado, “The Losers Conspiracy,” *Artforum*, March 26, 2020 → .

⁴ OluTimehin Adegbeye, “Why Social Distancing Won’t Work for Us,” *The Correspondent* → .

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “Chiarimenti,” *Quodlibet*, March 17, 2020 → .

⁶ Interview with Rob Wallace, “Where Did Coronavirus Come from, and Where Will It Take Us?,” *Uneven Earth*, March 12, 2020 → .

⁷ Claire Panosian Dunavan, “The Zoontic World,” *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 88, no. 4 (2013) → .