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From "Connectivity" to "Contagion": Pandemic Reflections on a Conceptual Shift

PP: title

I would like to use the more casual of our two formats for putting a few highly preliminary and experimental thoughts to you, reflections in the proper sense. They are quite unrelated to any kind of research project or possible publication. I will begin with a few general observations before I arrive at Global History. At the moment, frankly, I am not terribly interested in academic Global History and its future. But I needed some kind of scholarly topic for my talk if it should be more than a mere opinion piece.

I have decided not to overburden such a fireside talk with PowerPoint. But there *is* a PPP (with bibliographical references), and Verena Schröter will make it available.

(I)

For the sake of convenience, I will use the accepted term "Coronavirus pandemic". More often, I will talk about "the crisis", knowing quite well that we are facing a *bundle* of various crises that have separate roots but are interrelated. The main analytical challenge, in no way met in this brief talk, is (1) to disentangle the individual crises and then (2) to reassemble them into a comprehensive picture.

In current commentary on the pandemic, various historical authorities have been invoked, ranging from Thucydides with this famous description of the plague in Athens (in 430–426 BCE) to Elias Canetti and his great work *Masse und Macht* (Crowd and Power, 1960).

PP: Jacob Burckhardt

I take *my* clue from a different author who was only marginally interested in epidemics but very much so in historical crises – the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897). In a university lecture given in 1869, Burckhardt made a few remarks on simultaneous crises, "*die sich kreuzen*" ("which intersect").

This characterises our present situation quite well: an intersection of separate crises. The pandemic, as a medical event of global scope, intervened into a highly volatile and precarious international scene. It struck several major countries at a moment of great domestic convulsions. It somehow fuelled protest movements of independent origin such as the anti-racist activism across the world.

How are these crises, conflicts and tectonic shifts inter-related? Do they reinforce each other? Does, as Burckhardt graphically says, the stronger crisis "eats itself" through the weaker crisis? Are there any catalytic and accelerating effects? China was rising anyway, is it now rising faster? (The Chinese think so, they hope to be first in the Olympic race for a vaccine.) Is "Black Lives Matter" a totally contingent affair, dependent on something utterly improbable: the public killing of a black person in front of a camera? Or is the enormity of the exploding anger related to a general nervousness in Corona-stricken societies, or, more specifically, to the extreme vulnerability of the non-White population in the U.S. to the virus?

What explains the fact that "distant sympathy" – what the French sociologist Luc Boltanski calls "*la souffrance à distance*" – mobilizes anti-racist protesters across the planet, while nobody took to the streets in support of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. or of the victims of Assad's military and police, or in protest against the crushing of liberty in Hong Kong?

The pandemic reshuffles many cards, it rearranges the patterns of intersection and interference between various crises, all with their own respective histories. Suddenly dormant tensions re-emerge: the civil rights issue in the US, the conflict between India and China. Why? And why *now*?

I just raise these questions, without being able to answer them. The historian is tempted to say: It is too early for an answer ...

A *second* class of question, on everyone's mind, concerns the magnitude of the crisis. Assessments range from Trumpian trivialization to prophecies of doom. Even the most brilliant historians, appearing in the media, have said little more than that the crisis is "a turning point". Some have called it "unprecedented", others have fished for historical analogies, more or less convincingly.

In early July 2020, most of us, unless we live in a really dangerous place (but any place can turn dangerous overnight), are likely to feel that we are caught up in a very ugly situation rather than in a truly apocalyptic catastrophe. Food supply was never at

risk, water remained drinkable (as it was not during the famous epidemics of the nineteenth century), there were no power cuts and no restrictions on fuel, stocks of medicine never ran out, and trains continue to run even though many of us are reluctant to use them.

PP: REES 2003 - cover

In 2003, Martin Rees, the British Astronomer Royal and winner of almost any distinction short of the Nobel Prize, published a book entitled *Our Final Hour*. When you read Lord Rees's Doomsday-shocker today, you breathe a sigh of relief that we have so far been spared the hair-raising fates he describes– fates much worse than the infection with a virus of relatively low lethality.

PP: Foreign Affairs July 2020 - cover

Still, and this is my argument, the pandemic has multiple destabilizing effects that are just beginning to make themselves felt and are hardly predictable. The world is ***not*** becoming a safer place. We are probably edging a little closer to the nuclear brink: in South Asia, in Korea, in the Middle East. A dissatisfied population may drive political leaderships into diplomatic blunder and military adventure. As the Great Depression between 1929 and 1936 teaches us, mass unemployment – already in many countries a tangible consequence of the pandemic – does not lead automatically to the collapse of political democracy, but makes it more likely.

At the moment, and especially in Germany, the electorate is calmed, almost sedated, by the magic of unlimited money, the big "Bazooka". However, every sane person knows that there ***is no*** unlimited money. European societies and the more prosperous countries of Asia may prove a certain resilience towards *stagnation* while they are not really prepared for drastic decline and mass impoverishment. Even the *ecological* balance sheet is mixed: bluer skies over cities, and wild animals reclaiming lost habitats, are offset by intensified deforestation on a vast scale and the destruction of unprotected wildlife in Africa. The long-term trends towards environmental deterioration remain unbroken.

PP: Bundestagsdrucksache 17/12051 - 1st page

People outside the virulent "hotspots" hover in a state of suspense, moderately optimistic – and even crowding bars and beaches – and at the same time fearful of

an imminent unpleasant turn of events ("the second wave"), though probably not of mass death. In an uncannily visionary document of January 2013, the Research Department of the Deutscher Bundestag, outlined a carefully-crafted modelling of a flu pandemic in Germany. The experts arrived at an estimate of more than 7 million lives lost. While this is unlikely to happen, the future looks bleak enough for anyone who distrusts the current rhetoric of normalcy.

(II)

What does this mean for the ways in which historians look at the past?

PP: Map - Spanish Flu 1918-20

A few things are obvious: The history of medicine and public health will lose its Cinderella position at the margins both of scientific medicine and historical studies. It is quite amazing that none of the ambitious books published on the recent centenary of the end of the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference pays adequate attention to the Spanish Influenza of those years.

PP: BALDWIN 1999 - cover

PP: BASHFORD 2016 - cover

It will no longer be possible to overlook the fact that, ever since Venice invented the institution of quarantine the 15th century, it was considered a major responsibility of the state – not just in Europe – to protect its own subjects and citizens from epidemic threats. Economic history, social history, military history, even the history of the arts, they all bear traces of disease, if only we look hard enough. The history of the body (*Körpergeschichte*) has been a small and thriving field with more interest in gender identities than in medical topics. "General" historians are now called upon to absorb into their own work the vast knowledge generated by medical historians and physical anthropologists. This applies to all periods and regions. World history is impossible to understand without close attention to diseases such as malaria (the biggest killer in history), smallpox, yellow fever or plague.

(III)

Another candidate for reconsideration in cloudy times – and now I have arrived at the scholarly-sounding title of my presentation – is the idea of "connectivity" in Global History (the reason for my own presence at FRIAS).

Global history has been riding high world-wide for the past two decades. It may now face the need to reflect on its own explicit or unspoken intellectual assumptions. While it has come under attack unjustly – by critics both from the political Left and Right – as apologetics for neo-liberalism, there is a kernel of truth in the suspicion that global history has a kind of "sunshine bias", that it is a camouflaged kind of "Whig History", in other words: a success story – the world is getting ever more dynamic, integrated, mixed, borderless, peaceful and cosmopolitan. This attitude is deeply engrained in our basic terminology and the way we use it.

Let me give three examples:

PP: diagram stylized networks

First, "network": For many historians, a network is, in the words of the perennial classic *1066 and All That* (Sellar/Yeatman,1930), "a good thing". This enthusiasm for networks has yielded impressive scholarly results. Historians have uncovered a great number of border-crossing networks that would have escaped the notice of conventional nation-bound research strategies.

At the same time, networks may have served morally objectionable or downright criminal purposes. It may also be a mixed blessing to be enmeshed in a network. "Entanglement" – basically "a good thing" – can also lead to *over*-networking and suffocation in the sense of the beautiful German word "*sich verheddern*".

Second, "mobility". Mobility is a fetish of global history. If somebody or something is immobile they are of no interest to global historians. Multicultural port cities are a big favourite with researchers whereas nobody cares for sedentary country folk any more, not even many ethnologists. Technologies of speed are being celebrated, the snail and the pedestrian despised.

PP: ox cart – Concorde

What the current crisis, however, tells us, is that the constant expansion and acceleration of mobility is by no means an iron law of history. It took a shadowy historical actor named "SARS-CoV-2" just about two weeks in March 2020 to bring passenger air traffic to a global standstill, and to confine billions of people to their own four walls (if they have any). Mobility is not a force of nature. It can be frozen and arrested at very short notice. The same, of course, may be said of open borders.

Third. The simplest way of defining global history is to say that it is the study of long-distance connections – or, if you like it more pretentious, "**connectivity**" – in the past. Again, this has proved a highly fruitful perspective that is by no means exhausted. The teleological premise and "sunshine bias" here is that connectivity multiplies and thickens over time, that it brings about ever-tightening integration and exchange and that contact leads to mutual understanding, harmony and peace.

Once again, I'm not suggesting that all this is just starry-eyed idealism. Yet, there is a tendency to overlook the *quality* of connections and interactions and to underestimate the chance that connections are often non-reciprocal, unequal, asymmetrical, enforced and marred by dependency. Certain connections should be avoided – which exactly we have been doing for the past four months. In a world of "distancing" or "disconnecting" – keeping away from our best friends as well as from faraway travel destinations – the word "connection" acquires sinister connotations.

PP: rats – handshake warning

Given this transmogrification of connectivity from promise into peril, "contagion" is the word of the hour. Up to now, the term was reserved for medics and had no place in the historian's lexicon. We should explore its usefulness not just in history but also in the social sciences. In the July 2020 issue of the American journal *Foreign Affairs,* the Princeton political scientist John Ikenberry calls our time "the age of contagion". Why not – but what does that mean?

The *New Oxford Dictionary* suggests a narrow and technical definition of "contagion": "the communication of disease by one person to another by close contact". *Merriam Webster* adds a more adventurous variant: "a corrupting influence or contact". It also plays with the semantics of "poison". In this perspective, contagion is a harmful type of interpersonal influence, in short: it is "toxic connectivity".

Obviously, the term "contagion" is far from innocent. For example, it begs the question of agency. Does contagion just *happen* without anyone willing it, or can it be actively implemented? Connections can be deliberately created by *someone* with a clear purpose in mind. That does not seem to be the case with contagion, unless infection is used as a weapon in biological warfare. Human beings and animals often serve as passive and *unknowing* hosts and carriers of an invisible source of evil.

Innocence is lost at the specific point where people (and animals) are held responsible for transmitting disease. In this sense, contagion is construed as aggression, and those who are under suspicion of being contaminated are treated as enemies. Travelling foreigners, and domestic minorities, become the targets of preventive measures and often violence. They are charged with what the German language describes graphically as "eine Krankheit *einschleppen*". Still, while the anxieties attached to contagion may be seen as "culturally constructed", infection itself is a brute medical fact.

Let us explore the semantic field around "contagion" a little bit further! What is the "*Gegenbegriff*" (the counter-concept) to "contagion"? The opposite of "connection" is "disconnection", the "Gegenbegriff" to "contagion" seems to be "protection". We cannot talk about contagion and be silent about "protection". Since the dawn of recorded medical history, human communities have attempted to protect themselves from medical and sanitary threats.

The protective repertoire accumulated through the ages is fairly limited: expulsion, isolation, quarantine, hospitalization, vaccination. The only new addition in our days is "testing and tracking".

Looking for further semantic ramifications, we also find more benign meanings: Ideas and habits can be "contagious", laughter is "infectious". That is to say: We cannot help imitating others; we are swept up in a dynamic beyond our own control. Contagion in this figurative sense is not a relationship between a poisonous and a healthy individual but a *collective* phenomenon.

It is here that the most interesting recent literature takes up the issue, going beyond the historiographical milestones that already exist.

PP: HARRISON 2014 - cover

Economists and economic psychologists are nowadays studying contagion in financial markets. Damon Centola, a "Professor of Communication, Sociology and Engineering" in Philadelphia, has published a book on the social equivalents of viral dissemination entitled *How Behavior Spreads: The Science of Complex Contagion.*

PP: CENTOLA 2018 - cover

More aimed at the popular reader is the brand new book by Adam Kucharski, a young mathematician and epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical medicine: *The Rules of Contagion: Why Things Spread - and Why They Stop* (2020).

PP: KUCHARSKI 2020 - cover + author portrait

Such books, of course, always promise too much. This one is about the *search* for rules of contagion. They haven't been found yet. More precisely, current research has discovered a lot about the *origins* of epidemics and how they spread to become pandemics. Many of those scientific insights are now taken seriously by responsible policy-makers and have influenced our own behaviour.

What remains a great mystery is how pandemics ***end***. Counter-measures such as vaccination and coercive or voluntary distancing cannot explain everything. Pathogens are rarely vanquished on an open battlefield. They retreat and fade away, seldom obeying any rules.

(IV)

There is a cliché around that now, for the first time ever, "everything connects with everything else" and that we are experiencing globalization in its ripest form. Yet, the current pandemic is not dramatically "more global" than its major predecessors. It spread with the speed of a passenger aircraft (just as the cholera that killed Hegel in 1831 arrived by sailing boat), not with the speed of an e-mail or a computer virus. Diseases always travel with the most modern means of physical conveyance available in their time.

What is new in 2020, for instance, is that we have an incomparably better picture of global simultaneity than the contemporaries of any previous pandemic, think of the comparative scoreboards up-dated daily by the WHO and the Johns Hopkins University. Since, however, even today (fortunately) ***not*** everything is connected with everything else, it is possible to trace *specific* paths of contagion. Contagion is a concept of considerable precision. Historians might consider it as an alternative to cloudy "connectivity".