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PANDEMIC NARRATIVES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

A range of narratives has clamoured for attention from the very outset of the Covid-19 pandemic. If divergence is hardly surprising, simply because so many arenas of expertise and experience are involved, there are also remarkable convergences. Certain narratives get sedimented in habitual ways of talking, and often very quickly – the details presented here come from the early months of the pandemic.

Convergences: Ubiquitous Narratives

It is truism that the present pandemic is global both in the reach of the virus and the accompanying response. Medical infrastructures, with their laboratories, clinics, and drugs, bring certain forms of debate with them, not just the languages of molecular science or public health but also of governance, personal behaviour, and social control. Habitual expressions of thought recur over and again, as in constant reminders of how untoward – «unprecedented» – the present situation is. And faced with what is agreed to be a phenomenon of unexpected virulence, narratives frequently converge in the way they process imminent catastrophes. Here, two strands jump out.

Everywhere we seem to encounter a double impetus: on the one hand to make the strange familiar, and on the other to make the familiar strange. This holds whether people are coming to grips with what is happening, communicating warnings to arrest the transmission of the disease, or taking the view of an observer interested in effects and consequences. Let's turn to certain salient experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Making the strange familiar

Making the strange familiar works, as parallels often work, to make the new intelligible in already existing terms, whether to alert, reassure or provoke existing social and political alignments. Analogies for an otherwise alien Covid-19 have been drawn with known diseases, notably in Europe and the USA with seasonal flu. References to previous manifestations of SARS outbreaks in East Asia, not to speak of Ebola in Central Africa, or Zika in South America, and diverse epidemics, reach back into history to the plagues that dominated medieval and early modern urbanism. Such parallels invariably merge recognition of disease with its confinement: a plague is known by its drastic outcomes for whole swathes of a population, while today flu is a common and containable occurrence. Evaluations are implied in the terms used.

The effects of such evaluations may be stark. These days, plague is more familiar as an idea than as an experience; by contrast, talk of «living with» the Covid-19 virus takes heart from the milder connotations of flu. Yet the relative risks of flu and Covid-19 become trivialized when the former is used for dismissing the danger of the latter, as in the tragic outcomes in the deaths of those who thought Covid-19 was «only a kind of flu».[1]

Existing polarizations of the population can be reinvigorated by a new phenomenon (thus turning out to be not so new after all): another instance of making the strange familiar. Consider the stance of anti-vaxxers. The language to oppose government effort in the name of individual liberty is already there; what is new is its prevalence through the stance of anti-vaccination. Thus «vaccination» itself becomes imbued with connotations of authoritarian control. There is widespread reinforcement of the vocabulary of «the vulnerable». The twenty-first century's counterpart to the nineteenth century's «the poor» («the poor are always with us»), «the vulnerable» are already familiar. The subject position that defines them as weak and needy has swiftly become built into population management. Politics gets caught up in other ways, too. As one observer comments, «we must at all costs stop confusing viruses with living, infectious agents … [Or] … we will not only misuse antibiotics to the point of our own extinction, but fail to limit the impact of xenophobic sentiments that drive political policies and ambitions» (Napier 2020, p. 7).

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[1] The UK's government's preparedness was based on influenza, which encouraged the «herd immunity» scenario that delayed reactions to Covid-19. For another perspective, see Norman *et al.* (2021) on the devastating impact of «Spanish flu» and then «Hong Kong flu» on an Aboriginal community in Australia, where flu had plague-like connotations.

Making the familiar strange

The incursion into everyday life by what appears to be an alien presence generates a second impetus, which is to see what is around one in a new way. A hole in a fence, for example. Two musical families in Cardiff (Wales) who happened to be next-door neighbours, shared a fence down their back gardens; crucially the fence had a hole, and it was this that enabled the musicians to rehearse, keeping distance while also hearing one another. In fact, the English term «social distance» has led to much comment on the effects of a spatial protocol that has made interpersonal interactions so strange. Intimacies have had to be *re*-recognized, both in their disregard and in new ways of expression. And it is precisely not «social» distance, as critics have observed of the requirements,[2] but physical distance implying explicit social concern, namely regard for others. Technologies of control are rediscovered as technologies of care – and vice versa (Song – Walline 2020).

Other familiar ingredients of life are also made strange. The virus throws the ordinary bureaucracy of collecting statistics into the limelight: national governments engage the population through widespread reliance on numerical interpretations of risk. Lockdown means that schooling becomes extended exercises on-line, while parenting takes on a teaching dimension and a student flat designed as never much more than a bedroom has to serve as an entire dwelling space. Of course, the severity of lockdown fluctuates, and there is nothing «new» so to speak about encountering new situations, yet so much that is taken for granted can be seemingly pushed to one side. That includes jobs and livelihoods when performance artists or footballers are stripped of audiences and friends are prevented from meeting.

Both strands, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, are part of a process of accommodation common to the way many people narrate the unexpected. Together they reveal the extent to which the present crisis re-shapes what is already there. Speaking of «a pandemic» gives it the status of an entity, but like everything else in social life it is never one thing. Other issues are going on, leading to constant revisions in the way lives are conducted, as is evident in the saturation of global debates by concerns about crisis itself (as in incessant reference to the normal and new

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[2] Simpson (2020, p. 22) thus suggests that the semantic slippage obscures Covid-19's acceleration of the way many physical interactions become interactions mediated by ICTs. In contrast, for arguments that remote communication helps people sustain social connectedness, see the issue of *Public Anthropology* for March 2020 (American Anthropological Association).

normal). In sum, Covid-19 is not a simple encounter-story; the virus does not just have an effect *upon* society or culture. Rather, people have feelings to receive it with, ideas about how to make it matter, and practices to be cultivated or suppressed. They (re)produce for themselves the very conception of a pandemic in how they deal with it.

Narratives circulate as a discourse global in scope, creating the space for or encouraging the urgency of taking specific actions. At the same time, the anthropologist would probably add, these strands of discourse are powerful because they work as locally as they do globally, locally insofar as they are processed at specific places and times. In this sense stories may indeed diverge, wildly. Given their professional interest in specific places and times, anthropologists themselves often *contribute* to such divergences. So, what might they stress?

Divergences: The Global in the Local

Socio-cultural anthropology's particular form of global discourse lies in its comparative method, not so much universalizing or reducing to a common denominator, as keeping in play the particularities of social life while analysing any one context in the light of others.

Following the moment in mid-March 2020 when WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic, the journal of the European Association of Social Anthropologists sent out a call for 500-word reflections to be assembled as an Urgent Anthropological Forum. «Who gets to narrate this crisis?» (Bermant – Ssorin-Chaikov 2020, p. 218) was precisely one of the editors' questions. Response from more than 200 contributors was swift. They addressed ideas about old fears and new anxieties, existing controversies over vaccination and the separation of health from social life, alongside observations on Norwegians re-drawing the lines between public and private, contamination and Cambodian garbage pickers, outsmarting fate within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, forced migration across India, and Malaysian innovations in ritual. Others focused on artifacts and protocols, such as mask-wearing, new connotations of securitization, and the colonizing effect of viral metaphors.

Tiny fragments of life, but several possibilities for comparison: the redrawing of social expectations, the entrenchment of inequalities, memories of previous epidemics, mistrust of governments, new crises enveloped within old ones, notions of pollution and purity, privileging certain kinds of families and gender divisions, and the implications for anthropology's ethnographic commitment to first-hand study. Their reflections contained

nothing that many people could not have thought for themselves, but their specificities are *heightened* by being brought into conjunction. Comparison endorses the point that Latour (2020) made early on: the virus is not the «same» everywhere. It becomes inseparable from how it is dealt with. The global reach of Covid-19 is embedded in local conditions, as intimately as the virus lodges in the cells it needs in order to reproduce.

By the time the journal's Forum appeared (April 2020) there had already been a huge outpouring online, and across numerous disciplines, anticipating the massive scholarly output that was to follow. At that early moment, the journal already offered a list of where anthropologists could be found in debate: «on the University College London medical and digital anthropology websites, the Corona Times blog of the Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town, the COVID-19 Forum of the collaborative website *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine and Anthropology*, the online Editors' Forum of the [American] journal *Cultural Anthropology*, and the ongoing webinars and related resources of the American Anthropological Association» (Bermant – Ssorin-Chaikov 2020, p. 219; italicization amended).

But perhaps we should pause for a moment. If anthropologists are re-iterating what many people could have thought for themselves, what is the point of heightening these details? The answer is simple. It is to bring home the fact of lived contexts and consequences, for such consequences affect concrete social interactions. Each re-telling will come with its own twist, its own turn of events. Of course, we know that, but listen to specific cases. Consider the Forum comment on Covid-19 testing facilities in Russia that only existed because a 1970s Soviet biowarfare installation, built despite the then new Biological Weapons Convention, had since been converted to producing vaccines for epidemics. Then there is the quite separate account of the would-be good neighbour in Montreal who anguishes over whether to report a large gathering of Hasidic Jews, praying together in some semblance of normality. It is out of such socio-cultural moments – the specificity of place and time – that we find the impetus for a certain type of narrative, namely a narrative of observation, appraisal, and criticism. When situations are brought together, it is the details that invite appraisal. The accident of an already existing technical capacity in Russia and the piety of Jewish neighbours in Montreal (who, as it happens, had just returned from a high incidence area): in the way different kinds of threats are perceived, we may hear the historical resonances of the one case through the other.

Observation, appraisal, and criticism: we should not forget, then, that scholars and researchers create narratives too. If we turn to such narrators, whose comments are intended to be at some remove from what is being described, they would include anthropologists together with others from

social science, the humanities, critical studies and so forth. Among the job specifications of anthropology is social analysis. Such layerings of observation or comment, narratives of critique we might call them, not only report on divergences but work with them and upon them. I start with a critical observation of my own.

Narratives of critique

Several pieces from the Urgent Anthropological Forum touched on concepts of time. It was how the UK government dealt with temporality that staggered my reading at the time of its muddling through.

I must have been among thousands who kept cuttings and diary entries from those early months, so I have the date (12 March 2020) on which the British Government said it was going to stop tracking and testing cases, which sounded like a retreat from any record-keeping attempt. It was a visceral shock; I could not quite believe the stupidity of this measure. Since then, apart from hospitalizations and deaths, and leaving aside clinical trials, *public* corona statistics have not held much conviction. That abandonment of detailed surveillance had taken away the power of a key numbers narrative in the government's repertoire. Of course, I was naive – I simply had not realized how ill-equipped the state was. Moreover, my head was full of news stories of political ring fencing (ignoring the NHS on the grounds of its «needing protection», while also not answering offers of technical assistance from firms or educational institutions with specific expertise, while ministers set up their own network of private contracts). No doubt I was naïve in other ways as well, and I recount these sorry details to show how dependent we are on the terms in which narratives circulate. Having a critical handle on public discourse could not be more important. None of us is without our blind spots, and I criticize myself before venturing a point about some governmental narratives. It concerns manipulations of time.[3]

11 April 2020. On the news that morning, there was yet another interview with the Secretary of State for Health, Mr Hancock. He was quizzed about a professional medical body stating once again that clinical personnel lacked sufficient personal protective equipment, and was pressed for an admission of responsibility. The interviewer was stark: lives had been unnecessarily lost. Hancock agreed that his ministerial brief was to look after people's lives. Yet he repeatedly asserted variations of «We must take it from where we are at now». Where they were at now was not just the

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[3] A fuller account in given in STRATHERN 2021.

farce over equipment, but also constituted acting against WHO advice on mass testing. And in this absurd affair of PPE, Hancock explicitly said that we should grasp matters as they are now and *not* dwell on what is past. So, what kind of being-in-the-present was the minister creating? No one was asking for premature accountability, but acknowledging past problems would at least have signalled that there was something to learn. «Let's take it from here»: nothing to learn. This turned out to be a lethal stance.

At that stage, amidst reports on Asian countries (prepared for the emergency by past experience with SARS) relying on mass tests, there was a suspicion that the UK's restricted testing regime was recording only 5-10% of cases. Some medical scientists openly spoke out on the problem: the British government was not learning from experience elsewhere. Its nonchalant deferring of responsibility to some future moment (when the crisis would be «over») was a separation from the recent past that carried very real dangers. With complacency and laziness at the helm, it was as though time itself would solve things. I say this because, when it suited, government narratives could also turn time into a scarce resource.

In their pandemic briefings, it equally suited government spokespersons to claim that they were using every bit of time available, that everything possible was being done, that personnel were busy round the clock keeping everyone safe, night and day. The acme was reached in a painfully playschool idiom, namely that bureaucrats were «working their socks off». The protest is alarming if it implies that one cannot take it for granted that the government is bound to do all it can. Needless to add, such narrative performance falls into its own trap when everything becomes performative. One commentator (Matharu 2020) on those initial Coronavirus briefings borrowed a Russian anthropologist's term for fake normality, «hypernormalisation»: they're lying, we know they're lying, and they know that we know they're lying. Depending on what one reads, in the UK this can all too easily be applied to the state's carelessness (neglect of care homes), studied ignorance (of existing expertise), and the clandestine pursuit of ideological tenets (privatization of the ostensibly national test and trace system).

Yet all this brings us to a question. Quite apart from its where it comes from, what do we do with such criticism? The query is pertinent to the way pandemics generate a crisis-response, for dealing with a crisis must utilize all available resources, intellectual and otherwise. If local detail is indeed a springboard for criticism, the query is about the role of social criticism as such. When do the divergences recognized by the observer become productive insights into diverse interests and values, and when do such divergences become counter-productive? The following papers by Amaral and

Guimarães and by Kenema and Santos Da Costa, which discuss notions of crisis to specific critical effect, offer answers of a kind. In the meanwhile, I turn to a particular form of voicing criticism, namely through taking action. It is an example of the global in the local, where anthropologists adopt a divergent stand on assumptions that seem to need challenging.

Taking action

So let me amplify what has also been happening in the UK by describing one local anthropological response and its reception, indeed in places welcome, by government departments. If I may be allowed a sardonic aside, even the British government is many things: it has its committees and personnel who do in fact listen, who may themselves adopt a critical stance to policy-making, and who – appreciating the complexities – are ready to learn from the narratives of others. («Local» connotes attention to detail, the concrete and lived realities of people's lives, as in «global disease, local illness»; the local is not to be confused with the small scale – illness may be an all-consuming matter.) The local initiative in question, intended to be at once critical and constructive, took an activist form.

A team spearheaded by Laura Bear at the LSE (London School of Economics) formed a Covid and Care Research Group which studied, over the first eighteen months of the pandemic, people's coping practices in diverse parts of the UK. Its initial ethnographic investigation into disadvantaged households entailed detailed enquiry into the social arrangements by which people support one another. The first Report offers several recommendations stemming from the principal finding, namely, «Government policy can improve adherence to restrictions and reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on disadvantaged groups by placing central importance on the role of communities, social networks and households in economy and social life» (Bear, James and Simpson 2020, p. 4). Through Bear's membership of the national Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies,[4] the team had some early influence on government thinking concerning who could and could not meet together. Alert to those with multiple responsibilities or multiple households to manage, the research group advocated social bubble household policies.

One piece from the Urgent Anthropological Forum observes how government (citing the USA) has had to rediscover society. Where several contributors dwell on public-private realignments in lockdown, and others on

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[4] SAGE and its constituent committees.

people taking things into their own hands, this notes the state's need to fall back on forms of societal organization, such as «the family», whose flourishing is suddenly taken for granted. Yet there is a huge gap between the state's imagination here and lived realities. Narratives from the LSE Covid and Care Report make the point.

UK government briefings imagined workers who had the equipment, space, and kind of job to work from home, just as national educational provision fell back on the idea that parents would be able to teach, not to speak of the oversimplification of what labour (paid or unpaid) or business might entail. These fictions were blind to the precariousness, gender divisions, and real-time constraints of working lives. But, apart from that, they crucially *left out* what it was that people themselves often fell back on: networks of kin, friends, and neighbours.[5] These are social infrastructures, and the Report emphasizes that in difficult times such infrastructures require recognition and support. Indeed, given the long-term impact of austerity measures in the UK, not least on community services, it stresses the significance of local authorities. «Care» is its key concept, in the realization of how little state institutions may know about the populations they oversee.

The LSE Report thus scrutinizes assumptions about living arrangements that emerge from government advice, such as the effect on intra-familial dependencies of defining «households» not in terms of provisioning and care but in terms of a bounded living space. When the Report comes to «multi-family households», it specifically articulates the need to combat certain existing narratives, especially those of discrimination and blame. («Culture» had become a blame word.) «Contrary to widespread assumptions, "multi-family households" … [in the survey] could not be confined to specific class (ie., low income) or ethnic/cultural (ie. BAME or migrant) background; instead, responses from people of all ethnicities highlighted health- and wellbeing-related reasons for living together and for continuing to do so within the circumstances of the pandemic» (Bear, James, and Simpson *et al.* 2020, p. 26).

We may add a further layer of narrative. In trying to convey how Quechua-speakers in Peru imagine living entities, Peruvian anthropologist, De La Cadena (2019) is inspired by one of her interlocuters' use of the Quechua expression «earth being» to refer to a mountain, thus expressing more than «mountain» denotes in English. Such and such is a mountain,

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[5] This is not to overlook the possibility that real-life networks can also be sources of danger, just as intimacy can be detrimental and care coercive.

but as an earth being, she says, it is *not only* a mountain. In the same way, she refers to people as humans but «not only». A similar complexity is communicated by the Covid and Care team. Insofar as their remit is directed towards reform, they are conveying a particular concept to policy makers. It holds for anyone that the person, who must be individualized with respect to certain ends (medical treatment, say), is always also «not only» an individual. The team points to those social conditions where the fact that households are in reality «not only» households has been crucial to their coping – or not coping – with a pandemic mediated through lockdown measures.

Opening up Debate

Anthropology invests in comparisons across societies and cultures: what can be learnt from other factors not immediately related to Covid-19? If the pandemic poses all kinds of conceptual issues, it is simply because people are trying to deal with it. I have stressed that for the anthropologist the concept of «the local» is often a crucial step for comprehending how the specific circumstances in which the virus is being dealt with affects the very experience of it. This returns us to our starting point concerning the multitude of discourses or, with another mathematical twist, the multiplicity inherent in any narration.

This is hardly a new problematic for anthropological enquiry. Learning something of other languages is also to discover the limits of any language, and anthropology cultivates a reflexive approach to diverse narratives that rebound on its own. So, should we also be asking about the difference Covid-19 makes to the very disciplines that seek to interpret its consequences? Notably, would an interest in divergences, as between different kinds of understanding, merely reinvent old boundaries, with their stress on distinctive values and practices, in the face of a fresh opportunity to think again about the interconnectedness of life? Should we revisit the concept of culture itself?[6]

Until now I have been using the term «culture» freely. Insofar as the discipline is known to the general public, socio-cultural anthropology's most successful export is probably *this* concept – culture in the sense of world

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[6] A focus on «culture» here echoes Latour's (2020) on «society»: what goes by the wayside are ideas thus rendered old. For an apprehension of society as self-creation, see Lynteris 2020, pp. 140-41.

view, often heard as traditional or customary ways of doings things. Yet for anthropologists in recent years the concept has become controversial. I need not go into that, but remark that perhaps the passage of Covid-19 offers a fresh analogy, a new perspective arising out of the very issues we have been considering. While the pandemic mobilizes world-wide inter-connections, its global scope relies on its local effects. Analogously, perhaps one can retain the concept of a distinctive culture while not denying its porosity or openness to diverse influences. Any specific situation will have its cultural resonances, while also being «not only» an exemplification of pre-existing practices. In fact, the analogy recalls the way in which Melane-sian people in Papua New Guinea have adopted the English term «custom» for their own purposes: far from simply meaning tradition, they use it in the sense of one's relation to what is vital for present flourishing. We might re-invigorate «culture» with something like this connotation.

That in turn could take the discussion in another direction. What con-tribution might a focus on socio-cultural issues make towards any appre-hension of «a return to normality»? And whose normality would that be? Cultures as world views were once identified by that which people take as routine, as normal in the double sense of the ordinary and the normative, and were applied to discrete social units (hence «cultures» in the plural). As intimated, anthropologists have long broken out of this mould, but the salience of «normality» in Covid-19 narratives summons it again. What is new here is also very old.

If people regard anything as normal, then it will include their dealings with the present and its relation to both past and future. It becomes inter-esting to hear talk of a *return* to normality. Do people mean backwards or forwards (Lynteris 2020)? What conceptualizations of temporality are implied? Are Covid-19 times propelling us into a different orientation to the future? In a previous epoch, we would have asked on which of our many pasts do we build, and which of all our information bases or research methods do we take as guides for the future? Scholars of all kinds tended to assume that the knowledge with which they were familiar was what held up their view of the world. They were likely to point to an ever-increasing appreciation of human accomplishment, across many disciplines, the as yet unknown being a spur to greater effort. (It was a tenet of research that igno-rance increased as knowledge increased, yielding new horizons to explore.) Yet does the way in which we have enabled Covid-19 to exist among us demand we revisit such notions of future knowledge? It certainly prompts us to think again about other, less productive, sources of ignorance.

For we do not seem to be all that good in deploying the knowledge we have. In this symposium, Professor Rabe has spoken of chaos. Much

human contrariness or wilfulness is exposed by the pandemic. When we know the ease with which political experts play on the «unprecedented» conditions which face them, it seems that to keep the unpredictable in view may – instead of opening up minds – close them down. The notion of an unknown future with expanding horizons ceases to persuade. As a result, it is not so much that the future is uncertain but rather that its uncertainty is no different from the uncertainties of the past and present: we are beset on every side by varieties of ignorance – including willful ignorance – of the effects of our actions.

All this bears on longstanding debates about where responsibility lies. Such debates frequently evoke a foundational social science problematic in Western thought: how any kind of study or analysis must address the individual person as a responsible agent. We have learnt enough perhaps to know that this, too, holds alongside everything that makes persons «not only» individuals, existing within milieux of which they may or may not be aware.

A last comment. Putting conventional notions of scale to one side, the global-local distinction speaks to the simultaneous ubiquity *and* particularity of the narratives people tell themselves. Even global narratives are local, which is why we might finally ask whether notions of «common humanity» are help or hindrance. In all kinds of circumstances people readily summon generalized ideas about human behaviour, but that does not make the notions themselves any less particular. Perhaps the question should rather be about when such a construct is useful, invaluable even, and when it is an imposition on heterogeneities that are better acknowledged as such. The Covid-19 pandemic throws the question into stark relief. But it was one we made for ourselves long before.

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Abstract – From the very outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, a range of narratives has clamoured for attention. The divergence resulting from so many arenas of expertise and experience is at the same time offset by remarkable convergences. In this paper, Strathern presents details from the early months of the pandemic to show how certain narratives have become sedimented in habitual ways of talking. In terms of convergence, she identifies two strands: on one hand, making the strange familiar (e.g., drawing analogies between Covid-19 and earlier flu epidemics or outbreaks of SARS); on the other, making the familiar strange (e.g., the redefining and «re-recognizing» of social norms in the face of «social» distancing). Both strands are part of a process of accommodation common to the way many people narrate the unexpected. Together they reveal the extent to which the present crisis re-shapes what is already there. As for divergence, through observation, appraisal, and criticism, scholars and researchers also create narratives. These include anthropologists together with others from social science, the humanities, and critical studies, whose narratives of critique not only report on divergences but work with them and upon them. In offering her own critical observation on the events of spring 2020, Strathern questions the role of anthropology in constructing narrative of critique and opens debate on ways of taking action.