

A Separate Epidemic

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*In short, a tiny virus located in an ignored city of China triggered
the upheaval of a world*

Edgar Morin (2020)

This remark by Edgar Morin, which appears in an interview given to Le Monde in April 2020, reveals the peculiar nature of the epidemic of Covid-19¹. A coronavirus which, having appeared in the last months of 2019, has continued to feed the attention and concern of a considerable number of commentators - journalists, politicians, writers, philosophers -, finding a resounding echo in the public's state of mind. This phenomenon deserves a closer look. Indeed, the worldwide emergence of Covid-19 offers itself as a paradigmatic case of illustration of the close relationship between scientific knowledge, political strategies, social discourse, common sense, and existential experience in relation to risk and contagion. This relationship is discussed throughout the different contributions to this issue of PSR to which I will add a few remarks concerning different modalities of information processing concerning Covid-19.

¹ This text uses the expression "Covid-19" that has become common to refer to the current Coronavirus epidemic: SARS-CoV-2

While acknowledging the seriousness of this health episode, one cannot help but wonder what accounts for the magnitude of the provoked reactions. Could it be just an effect of the hype of the mass media, always in search of something new or sensational? Could this health episode be an opportunity to express deep social anxiety? Designated under the category of "crisis", would it be a means of denouncing the systemic dysfunctions of our contemporaneity? Would it be a metaphor for an existential malaise? More simply, would it awake, in each person, a concern for physical integrity and a fear of death? To try to shed light on this phenomenon, I proposed to see if Covid-19 arouses the same reactions and evocations as the great epidemics that have taken place in the past. This work is in progress and I will only give here its framework.

To carry it out, I used literary or journalistic texts as material. The choice of this material is justified from several points of view. On the one hand, messages transmitted through written or visual channels play an important role in the formation of public sensibilities and opinions; on the other hand, literary expression reflects the mentality of a time or a period marked by a particular situation. The study of artistic production was recognized very early on as a fruitful field of study using the social representations approach. Moreover, literature fulfilled and still continues to fulfill important functions during the period of confinement. Reading was claimed to provide comfort, support, and was even used as a survival technique, often referencing to a practice widely used in the Anglo-Saxon world: bibliotherapy (Thivet, 2015).

Such an approach makes it possible to detect in literary works and journalistic commentaries the mirror image of experiences, spontaneous or induced, in the face of disease and contagion. Given the close relationship between socio-historical contexts and imaginary productions, for this review, mainly French productions will be examined. The period chosen for the choice of texts is post-World War II in order to grasp as closely as possible the articulation between states of society and the social, political, moral and psychological themes developed in relation to contagious episodes - often related to what happens in times of war. I give here a quick overview of the work that is being carried out.

PARTICULARITIES OF THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC

The Covid-19 epidemic has specific characteristics that distinguish it from other epidemics that have marked history such as the "antonine plague" (166-189), the "black flu" from the 16th to 18th century, the pandemic of the end of the 19th century, the

"Spanish flu" (1918), the "Asian flu" (1956), the "Hong Kong flu" (1969), the "avian flu" (1997, reappeared in 2003), the SARS (2002), the "H1N1 flu", known as swine flu (2009), the MERS-COV (2012), Ebola (2014), and Zika (2016) viruses. These health episodes generally spread over a period of two years. If we consider those that appeared in the 20th century, none of them have attracted as much attention as Covid-19, nor have they been the subject of an abundant social discourse since their appearance. There are several reasons for this.

Lima and Sobral (2020) have shown that the Spanish flu, which was the most serious demographic disaster of the century, with 50 million deaths worldwide, did not attract the attention of the media. Nor did it leave its mark on the collective memory, still under the impact of the Great War. As a flu, it fell into the category of a banal event, but above all, it called into question the responsibility of states and of science. Still, and in spite of the uncertainties of science and the procrastination of politics, Covid-19 had a wide and immediate repercussion. Several factors intervened in this direction. In the first place comes the immediacy of its diffusion on a planetary scale, all agreeing to see it as an event of world-wide scope. Second, the use of virtual communications has contributed to an apocalyptic view of the world and of the present. Not only allowed for the proliferation of "naïve" commentary on "scholarly" information, but allowed reflections from the medical community and the social sciences. Lastly, nowadays, there has been a notable shift in attention onto health issues. This has led, as Fassin (2020) puts it, to a reversal of values, with biological life appearing to be more important than the economic one.

The current review covers two types of texts: 1) texts published in daily or weekly newspapers by well-known writers or columnists²; 2) literary texts on epidemics. The period chosen is after the Second World War, which had several episodes of epidemics, as we have just seen, whereas nothing of the kind occurred between the two wars in Europe. However, reference will be made to epidemics that marked the 19th century or earlier periods.

Indeed, in literature, epidemics have occupied a central place that goes back to antiquity, with Sophocles' "King Oedipus" or "the plague of Athens" reported by Thucydides in his "History of the Peloponnesian War". So much so that chroniclers see in the account of the plague a particular literary genre. To be convinced of this, it is

² *La croix, L'Express, Le Figaro, Le Monde, l'Observateur*

enough to recall some famous works such as *The Decameron* by Boccaccio (1353/2013), *The Diary of the Year of the Plague* by Daniel Defoe (1722/1982), *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni (1827/2014), *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London (1912/1995), Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1923/1996), Antonin Artaud's chapter "The Theater and the Plague" (1933/1958), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in times of Cholera* (1985/2007), Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2012), not to mention the authors selected for our analysis.

Thus, having become an "object of literary fantasy" (Phélip, 2020), the epidemic has been the subject, in France and over time, of an abundant production of no less than 441 texts, mostly translations, since only 26 works have been written in French. Focused on the relationship between literary work and the current socio-historical context, the analysis in progress is limited to works produced since the Second World War, starting in 1945: *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947), *The Hussar on the roof* by Jean Giono (1951), *The Times of Love* by Marcel Pagnol (1977); *The Quarantine* by Jean Marie le Clézio (1995); *The Pandemic* by Franck Thilliez (2015). As far as the articles published in the press are concerned, the analysis covers the period from the installation of the containment (17 March), until the period when, from 11 May, a modification of the procedures for protection against Covid-19 occurred, following the instructions from the health and state authorities, announced as likely to be extended over a long period. From that moment on, questions about what will happen in the "next world" of the epidemic began to emerge. This projection into the future, when it will be more substantial than it is at the time this text is written, may offer interesting material for study.

THE SPECIFIC SCOPE OF THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC

While some wonder why so little attention was paid to the pandemics of 1957 and 1968, despite the fact that they caused millions of deaths, it seems that, in the case of Covid-19, commentators, while stressing its global, planetary impact, do not consider so much the scale of its victims, however considerable. They consider the speed of its spread and, above all, the novelty of the phenomenon characterized by "the unknown, the surprise, the unexpected, the unanticipated, the invisible". This translates into a "festival of uncertainties" (Morin, 2020) about the origin, development, mutations of the virus, and the endemic or regressive nature of the epidemic. Scientific uncertainties then reinforce "social" concerns.

On the other hand, voices are multiplying to underline the social and economic impact of the pandemic, which appears to be unprecedented in the history of epidemics (Nau & Flahault, 2020), as various sectors of human activity have been destabilized by it. Certainly, the pandemics of the end of the 20th century had led to flu no longer being considered a benign disease, because, as Keck (2010) says, "even in its etymology, flu is what stops a system. With the strike, they have similar functions, one natural and the other social: they paralyze the economy". Nevertheless, it now appears that Covid-19 "has the luxury of gripping the whole world" (Rérolle, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic has provoked emotions involving all forms of life (personal, social, professional), and inscribed in the long term, whereas until then events and social emotions had had a punctual character (Bouchat, Melzler & Rimé, 2020).

To this particularity, the role played by social networks is added or manifested. According to Nau and Flahault (2020) "never before, as with this nascent epi-pandemic, have we taken the contagious measure of the flaws in the globalization of material and informational exchanges, the effects induced by hyperconnectivity, and the virulence of social networks". So much so that commentators talk about it as "infodemia" (Bellal, 2020). This term refers to the circulation of rumors, false information, fake news, in social circles. In the case of Covid-19, the observation of the importance of infodemia and its possible damage on the morale of the public, led the Director General of the WHO to say, "We are not only fighting an epidemic, we are also fighting an infodemia". The French government and the digital giants also established a code of good practices against online disinformation.

Given these particularities, it seemed appropriate to examine the processes that underpin public reactions, which the reader will find detailed expression in the surveys presented in this issue of PSR. In order to do so, it was necessary to choose a comparison between texts on Covid-19 and literary texts on cases of epidemics.

In the literary production relating to epidemics, several diseases have been dealt with over time: cholera, leprosy, plague, poliomyelitis, syphilis, tuberculosis, smallpox. Post-World War II texts were devoted to plague, cholera, poliomyelitis and smallpox. In the selected sample, only the following diseases are included: plague (Camus, Pagnol), cholera (Giono), smallpox (Le Clezio). Several features seem to me to mark the production analyzed: its premonitory character; the reference to fear; an approach that concerns the experience lived by individuals or within small groups, the close link between the psychological and social dimensions that mark the response to an epidemic.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE ON EPIDEMICS

One of the characteristics of works of fiction is to appear as works anticipating the future. Soccavo (2020), who defends the thesis of premonition in relation to texts about epidemics, refers anecdotally to the work of an American clairvoyant, Sylvia Browne, published in 2012 and containing her predictions about the end of the world. The quotation she gives is reproduced here: "Around 2020, a disease resembling severe pneumonia will spread throughout the world, attacking the lungs and bronchial tubes and resisting all known treatments. Even more astounding than the disease itself will be its sudden disappearance and reappearance 10 years later, before disappearing for good as quickly as it appeared". In 2017, Don Meyer's book *L'année du Lion* was published in France. Its title in English is *Koors* (word meaning "fever" in Afrikaans), referring to a fever that decimates 99% of humanity and has similarities with the Covid-19 epidemic. One may question the premonitory value of these works, instead, they should be understood as reflecting a structure whose homogeneity derives from typical epidemic responses.

These works present a particularity in relation to the current situation of the propagation of Covid-19, whose massive character is underlined, to which the influence of the media is no stranger. They concern the experience which is lived on a reduced scale: that of individuals or restricted groups, allowing the identification of universal processes and offering favorable material for a psycho-sociological approach. These testimonies on a private experience are only beginning to become part of the accessible literature on Covid-19 and are still rare. The comments devoted to Covid-19, focus, mainly, on its massive, social and political aspects.

On the other hand, there is an important element of the schema organizing the works of fiction, which is found in the texts relating to Covid-19. It is the fear of the virus. The case of Thilliez's work *The Pandemic* is exemplary from this point of view. In an interview given to the magazine "Le Point", this author explains that he wanted to make an account of what would happen in France if a virus spread quickly without killing. Having consulted the researchers of the Pasteur Institute of Lille, he invented an unknown virus, and developed, on the basis of the testimonies and readings that he was thus able to have, a scenario that turns out to correspond to that of Covid-19. He wanted to "sow panic", a phenomenon that the researchers feared in front of the possibility of a flu. He wanted to "tell in advance all the economic, social and human consequences", to make

people understand "how the invisible, the unknown" and viruses can frighten people. And this book describes phenomena that correspond to those observed with Covid-19: school closures, overcrowding in health care facilities, vaccinations, lack of masks, hygiene measures to be observed, etc. It also tackles the question of information which seems to have become, today, a major stake in the confrontation with an epidemic because of the development of social networks. Another common element to the treatment of epidemics and to Covid-19 is to find, in all the works analyzed and in the testimonies about Covid-19, the presence of a fear which, affecting individuals and communities, underlies diverse reactions.

Another strong tendency is to use the metaphor of war in connection with Covid-19. It is always referred to, if only to criticize its relevance and, even in this case, one does not fail to evoke its similarities, whether on an event-based or procedural level. The reservations about equating the epidemic with war is the absence of fighting and of violent deaths (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2020) and that there is no enemy (Illouz, 2020). Nevertheless, a connection is possible if we refer to a war "time": as in the cases of war, time has changed between the period before the appearance of the virus and the period since then, the end of which is unknown. The risks of a moral crisis are also evoked with regard to what reminds us of the weakness of the biological base of our humanity (Héritier, 2008) and gives a lesson in humility.

Closely associated with this vision, the temporal dimension is of great importance in the Covid-19 approach. For the historian Boucheron (2020), the situation provoked by Covid-19 has the novelty of being more futuristic than evocative of ancient periods. But if the questions about the aftermath of the pandemic are numerous, the future appears to be rather indefinite. This reduces the interest in resorting to examples from the past and increases the feeling of uncertainty.

This rapid review of the guidelines of an ongoing research project allows us to assess the repercussions that the Covid-19 pandemic is experiencing today. The other articles published in this issue of PSR allow us to grasp the importance and the psychological, social and political significance of this pandemic.

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