

Pandemonium

VAG
ABO
NDS

Series editor: Max Haiven

Also available

002

The Hologram: Feminist, Peer-to-Peer

Health for a Post-Pandemic Future

Cassie Thornton

OOI

Pandemonium

Proliferating Borders of Capital
and the Pandemic Swerve

Angela Mitropoulos

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2020 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Angela Mitropoulos 2020

The right of Angela Mitropoulos to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4330 3 Paperback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4331 0 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 0 7453 4322 8 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 0 7453 4321 1 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
Introduction	1
Origin of the Species	17
Origins—Taxonomy—Speciation—Herding	
Quarantine	34
Neoliberalism—Colonialism—Medieval Europe— <i>Cordon Sanitaire</i>	
Bodies in Motion	49
Herd Immunity—Hobbes—Malthus— Epidemiological Mathematics—Statistics, Class, and Racial Classification	
Pharmakon	73
Patriarchal Feelings—Risk-Taking, Risk-Shifting—Pushing Hydroxychloroquine— Experiments, Trials, and Lab Rats	
Liquid Geometries of Value	87
Pandemic Bonds—Supply-Chain Logistics	
Economy and Infrastructure	108
Money and Debt—Postpandem Contracts	
<i>Notes</i>	121



Acknowledgments

Many thanks go to Max Haiven and all those at VAGABONDS and Pluto Press who worked through difficult times, to Matt Kiem, S.L. Lim, Thomas Lynch, Wenny Theresia, Liz Thompson, Sanmati Verma, Liz Crash, *New Inquiry*, *Out of the Woods*, *New Socialist*, *Transversal* and, not least, the reviewers who patiently read through early versions. Caveats concerning blame for any shortcomings apply. May the churn build a new world.

VAG
ABO
NDS

Introduction

How we make sense of the pandemic is based on assumptions about the origins of the virus, the causes of disease and death with which it is associated, and contested views regarding what it exposed or revealed or is known. Understandings of disorder, like perceptions of chaos, or definitions of crisis and threat, depend a great deal on perspective and assumptions of what an orderly world might otherwise be. John Milton coined ‘Pandæmonium’ for his epic, mid-seventeenth-century poem *Paradise Lost*. It means ‘all demons’—from the Greek ‘*pan*’ for ‘all.’ His use marked a shift from the meaning of ‘*daemon*’ as ministering oracle to that of fallen angel or malign supernatural being. In *Paradise Lost*, Pandæmonium is the name of the capital city of Hell—an infernal gathering on the shore of the Lake of Fire, where disobedient angels deliberate on whether there is hope of regaining heaven or whether to believe in ancient prophecies of a new creation. Here, ‘pandemonium’ instead describes the emergence of an order from treatments of chaos—and it does so without the nostalgic assumption that what went before the pandemic was a paradise undone by disobedience and sin. How and whether the pandemic presents a turning-point or swerve, and

toward what, is the question to which this book is addressed.

In terms of scale, the microbial event of a new virus will arguably come to represent the largest intensive swerve of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. By the end of April 2020, New York City hospital mortuaries, crematories, and city-run morgues had run out of space. Some were resorting to refrigerated trailers. More than 17,000 people had died from the disease—almost five times more than died in the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001.

A swerve, or *clinamen*, was how the ancient Roman poet Lucretius described the cascading effects from one molecular movement in his epic poem *On the Nature of Things*—and in his deliberations on the plague that accompanied the fall of Athenian empire. There, he offers a theory of natural causes at odds with the major traditions in so-called Western philosophy which holds that it is within the nature of things to realize a destiny that was present at their origins and according to their rank. Lucretian philosophy points elsewhere. It refutes the subordination of lives to the assumptions of an idealized Way of Life and, by setting aside the sorting between unruly matter and eternal forms on which that idealization depends, the unaccountable, transcendent fatalism implicit in the terminology of the natural disaster. But if the precise, contingent base point from which a swerve happens cannot be known in advance—the molecular change in the protein spike that sets SARS-CoV-2 apart from other coronaviruses and which, among the numerous mutations for which

viruses have a remarkable capacity, managed to survive repeated encounters with human immune systems—both responses to the pandemic and the conditions of human health have been centuries in the making.

Some of those responses have drawn on understandings of health and disease that are models of social order recast as an eternal nature, rendering those responses ineffective in stemming the transmission of disease. Despite drawing on the analogy of contagion to redescribe crises, much the same is true of the risk analyst Nassim Taleb's black swan, in which the question becomes how to convert an unforeseeable event and spreading crisis into an opportunity for financial gain. The black swan is simply the name for a programmable response to uncertainty that treats nonlinear effects as if they were a universal repeating pattern found in nature. These approaches redefine what an effective response to a pandemic means. Bluntly, while some responses have been turned toward saving lives, others have sought to enhance and preserve the very system that has conditioned the patterning of illness and deaths. As with the biosecurity and disaster apparatus elaborated after 9/11, definitions of threat and security, however implicit, can convene and justify actions that multiply death and suffering along certain lines.

The title of this book is also a gesture to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*—the English title of the work in which he presents his theory of how the production of knowledge is always a matter of power relations. It points, moreover, to debates and assumptions concerning neoliberalism.

Against the conventional view of neoliberalism, not only did borders proliferate, but they did so largely without challenging the assumption that they are a means of protection against the ravages of capitalist exploitation rather than the arbitrage which makes exploitation possible. This facilitated the turn between neoliberal government and the resurgence of the far Right.¹

This is not to suggest that the approach taken here follows Foucault—except in foregrounding these debates and the epistemological question of how we know what we know, or think we know.² More so, it is to point out that *The Order of Things* is an allusion to the eighteenth-century political economist Adam Smith’s repeated turn of phrase: “the natural course and order of things.” In Smith’s economic liberalism, that presumably natural economic order could not be realized through sovereign rule but, instead, would be providentially manifested by the self-interest of property-owners, whose decisions would be guided by knowledge of the “wealth of nations.” This is the figure of *homo economicus*, or ‘rational economic man.’ The invisible hand is revealed to economic man, in other words, by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—a metric that Smith envisaged but that did not quite emerge until the twentieth century. For Smith’s contemporary, the reactionary cleric and political-economist Thomas Malthus, the natural economic order could only be revealed by eliminating the moral hazard of parish welfare. For him, the price of bread would be the spur to individual moral-economic decisions. The misery that ensued as the result of the withdrawal of welfare

would serve as a proxy for the biblical plagues and famines by re-enacting a purportedly natural means of death for large segments of the ‘unproductive’ population. Much has been made of the contrast between these crucial thinkers whose prolonged influence cannot be overstated, irrespective of whether they are still read. Yet these prototypical approaches to economic liberalism and authoritarian government are both premised on the idea of the household (*oikos*) as the primordial economic unit and presumably natural justification of exploitation. Put simply, they were both moral economists from whom the idealized (patriarchal) household served as the model of a proper law and order.

Briefly, the idea of a natural economic hierarchy is the assumption, derived from medieval estates and ancient texts on household management, of a heritable patriarchal authority over women, children and, not least, bonded servants and bound slaves. It is the source of contemporary (mis)understandings of gender and race and, in their abstraction from the history of the feudal estates and plantation economies from which capitalism emerged, their disconnection from distinct understandings of class. The false choice between liberal and reactionary forms of economic management premised on the hierarchical household (*oikos*)—and its indivisible personification in a politics from which its subordinates are excluded—has become the model for almost all systems of modern political authoritarianism and economic liberalism. Because it naturalizes the asymmetries of surplus-value extraction, it is

not outside the circuit of capital but integral to its systems of accumulation, particularly in moments of that circuit's crises.³

Understanding this systematic logic helps in theorizing the politics of the pandemic in a way that highlights the centrality of the economic unit of 'the household'—as well as the infrastructures and supply chains of healthcare, communication and food without which no private household could survive the lockdown. It also makes it possible to see how stay-at-home orders have not made the lives of those trapped with abusers or those without affordable or any housing safer, even as in other instances it has amplified the outsourcing of gendered conflicts over household work to domestic service and supply workers—and to link the entitlements that foster intimate violence to those of macroeconomic policy and geopolitics. As, for instance, in the discussions of epidemiological mathematics and money below suggests, the practices of statistical knowledge and workings of national currencies are pivotal to the naturalization and extraction of surplus value. These overlapping practices of governance, no less than overt articulations of racism, ableism or sexism, point to neoliberalism's endogenous turning-points to authoritarian and fascist politics. At the same time, this book presents a warning against treating economic liberalism and economic nationalism as fundamentally irreconcilable—particularly when the crisis to which solutions are addressed is that of capitalism rather than health.

Moreover, the appearance of the virus in China in late 2019 and its later spread to ‘the West’ makes it important to address the idea of a natural economy in its national and geopolitical scales, even where ‘natural economy’ is rendered as an anthropological aesthetics of cultural differences and units. Chief among these is the return of the East-West dichotomy and insinuations of Eastern uniformity. As comparisons of epidemiological curves suggest however, the dichotomy is an imaginative orientalist fiction. Singapore, the Philippines and Bangladesh had comparable peaks to those of Sweden, Hungary, the United Kingdom and the United States. Malaysia’s arc was similar to the Netherlands. The peaks and falls in Thailand, China, Taiwan and Vietnam approximated those of New Zealand, Norway and Austria. While this does not describe the uneven conditions within each of those countries, it nevertheless illustrates the absence of generic Eastern or Western approaches and experiences.

Despite this, for some the global pandemic prompted a return to discredited imperialist maps of geocultural uniformity and division. In one increasingly popular rendition there is a nostalgia for a “deep structure” of Western philosophy’s ancient categorical teleology that is said to give rise to a necessary law and order. Having regrettably been lost in the West, it is fortuitously rediscoverable in the East’s “Confucian ways of thinking” and its presumably unique respect for professional expertise and “hyper-sensitivity to disorder.”⁴ Informed by Kantian geopolitical anthropology (the source of the idea of distinct ‘continental’

ances), and nurturing a Machiavellian preoccupation with having the ear of aspiring princes, the ascription of cultural uniformity is an attempt to circumscribe class conflict to an implicitly ethnonationalist orbit of geocultural ‘self-regulation’ or discipline.

This is how the recent history of conflicts over healthcare, pensions and work in China that preceded and shaped the impact of the disease have been erased, including by much of the Anglophone and European left. For instance, there is little discussion of the ways in which China’s *hukou* or household welfare registration system fostered the geographic (and often gendered) inequalities in which coastal cities were privileged, as compared to inland cities such as Wuhan, the privatization and commercialization of its health-care system, or the waves of strikes throughout China over the years that might shake the idea of a unique cultural bond between governments and populations.⁵

Yet geoculturalism is also a diagram that, in seeking to derive a law and order from imputed anthropological variations, converges with far-right ethnopluralism—such as that promoted in the 1960s and ’70s by Alain de Benoist and France’s *Nouvelle Droite*. It is an important ideological inspiration of today’s global far-right insurgency—particularly those who insist they are not white supremacists but, merely, adherents of the idea of unique ethnological or cultural differences which must be preserved through global segregation. Simply because they draw on seventeenth-century European anthropological and

cultural understandings of race—as distinct from more recent biological or ‘scientific’ concepts of race—does not mean that geocultural paradigms are any less concerned than seventeenth-century European colonists and powers with using race as the predicate of law and order and the justification for an associated imperial cartography.

In their preoccupation with the geopolitics of race, order and chaos, these thinkers are far from alone. Speculation about the post-Covid world and the new world borders it is shaping are informed by perceptions of chaos that are manipulated into the seemingly self-evident intuition for a new geopolitical order. That geopolitical order assumes a modular system of economic nationalism that draws on ethnopluralism.

The stakes, however, concern the very logic of capital, which requires the assignment and enforcement of well-defined property rights so as to proceed through and conclude its asymmetric, exploitative circuit. The actual system to which this gives rise is far more archipelagic in its spatial and temporal arrangements than diagrams of global nationalism assert. It is turned to creating groups of workers and populations placed outside citizenship or the full scope of political and economic rights.⁶ Contrary to the economic nationalist idea of self-sufficient (re)production, all borders have always been porous. Accumulation involves filtering, not a fixed impermeable line. In practice, then, geocultural approaches simply convert the logic of capital, through the repertoire of cultural aesthetics, into a global political predicate of capitalist lawmaking exclusive of large swathes of

workers. In treating culture as an inherited and unique property, cultural nationalism, economic nationalism and geocultural approaches implicitly treat nations and economic management as analogous to an idealized familial and patriarchal household. From that point on, they mystify the quest to install a boundary between ‘proper’ political representation of the nation and a purportedly ‘proper’ economic policy which regulates the movement of workers. In the orientalist version promulgated during the pandemic, the ‘lost’ system of a classical (‘Western’) exclusion of slaves, women, and children from politics is simply projected onto and rediscovered in a generic, contemporary ‘Asia’ as its fortuitous manifestation.

On the other side of the Pacific, in what we are told is a world away, Donald Trump’s seemingly chaotic rule in the US has involved a systematic effort to remove the political rights of large parts of the workforce (through disenfranchisement, limits on citizenship and the cudgel of detention and deportation). However frustrated or incompetent that effort has been, it has been consistent and consistently shaped his response to the pandemic. For all their differences, the Chinese and American governments’ responses have been shaped by a similar logic. In the US case, the dream of a workforce stripped of political rights and relegated to economic subordination (the *oikos* in the classical formulation) has animated Trump as much as it has shaped the US administration’s geopolitical affinity toward authoritarian government elsewhere.