From Ovid to COVID

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1 Virus

Viruses and colonialism are hand in glove, to posit an unsanitary metaphor. As Jared Diamond wrote in *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997), his best-selling global history, European colonisation, particularly in the Americas and Australasia, cannot be understood without reference to the terrible, at times genocidal, ravages inflicted by disease on Indigenous societies. Yet at the same time, and in a bitter irony, anxieties about disease and dirt were used to justify invasion, racial discrimination and paternalist colonial laws (e.g. Bashford 1998, Yip 2009). While European germs wiped out Indigenous communities, it was colonised subjects themselves who were constructed as the harbingers of disease. The colonial project was often imagined not just as a religious, moral, and economic mission, but as an exercise in public health.

We get the metaphors we deserve. As Lorenzo Veracini has explained (2015), bacteria and viruses are two ways of thinking about invasive foreign bodies; two ways, in fact, of understanding processes of colonisation, be they corporeal or political. For, like colonialism itself, infections operate in different ways. Bacteria treat cellular life as obstacles to their territorial expansion. *Terra nullius,* a legal term, is a bacterial fantasy – endless expansion into supposedly vacant land. According to the logic of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples were

an inconvenience to be circumvented, and even – as in Tasmania and elsewhere – eliminated. But viruses operate differently. They *depend* on living cells in order to replicate. Slavery, a legal institution, is a viral fantasy – the hijacking of host organisms for the benefit of the intruder. This is why the metaphor of the zombie discussed by Chris Reitz in this collection was originally a critique of slavery – of bodies taken over by alien invaders. According to the logic of extractive colonialism, local peoples were not an inconvenience to be eradicated: their labour was, on the contrary, a resource to be exploited. So the language of infection provides a useful lens through which to understand two very different kinds of domination. Bacterial cells displace host organisms; viruses commandeer them. To be sure, heuristics over-simplify reality—colonial societies like Australia were not just one thing or the other; Indigenous people have always been treated as bodies to be used as well as spaces to be cleared. At the same time, the legacy of colonialism, and its associations with infection, continue both to impact and to illuminate the world we live in.

In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), a celebrated book which is surely the lodestar of this volume of essays, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson insist that metaphors are not just rhetorical or ornamental. On the contrary, they are fundamental tools of thought. The connections they draw between lived experience and abstract concepts and institutions shape our understanding of the world. What is a corporation but a metaphor—'legal personality'—which the legal system has chosen to literalise? Susan Sontag, in *Illness as Metaphor* (1977), insists that certain diseases (she was thinking in particular of tuberculosis and cancer) take on a metaphorical significance that ricochets, often damagingly, back on to how we treat actual human victims. She argues that metaphors of disease ought to be taken seriously, both for what they reveal about our societies, and for what they conceal.

The power of metaphor to reshape the unknown in terms that are already familiar to us is no more evident than in moments of crisis, moments of confusion and disorientation, in which our need to find comprehensible frames of reference becomes especially urgent. Well

before the current COVID-19 pandemic, we were awash with viral metaphors. The virus is the perfect metaphor for digital transmission: immortal, invisible, frictionless, immediate. It suggests a world of unlimited exponential growth. So it is also a perfect metaphor for digital capitalism (McQueen 2017): a system in which profits are created by microscopic trades that hurtle through virtual space at close to the speed of light, and in which financial products are themselves so abstracted from the limited physical and human resources of the planet as to appear weightless, effortless, incorporeal. We yearn to go viral, exponential growth on the social media of choice overwhelming its defences and taking it over. Perhaps we want to become like a virus ourselves, to partake in that communion of body and spirit.

But the very genius of digital communication is also its greatest danger. Viral contamination is highly contagious. It can be triggered by the opening of an email or the flicking of a switch. It can happen without our knowledge or our consent. We install anti-virus software on our computers. But the more our devices come to seem inseparable from our identities, our histories and our memories, the more vulnerable we are. Our dread of malware is by now almost existential.

In the last couple of years, however, the digital metaphor of the virus has returned to the body from whence it came. The coronavirus has revealed how stretched thin our societies have become, how dependent on increasingly complex but also increasingly vulnerable connective tissues. The multiplicity and instantaneity of those connections accounts for the speed at which the virus spread and the desperate measures of disaggregation required to check it. Accounts for the rapidity at which unemployment arrived, particularly in the gig economy, amongst digital natives. Accounts for the sudden collapse of supply chains on which we depended for everything from masks to toilet paper. The 'just in time' economy wasn't. If the virus was already a central metaphor for twenty-first century life, the coronavirus exposed it, non-metaphorically. It demonstrated the limits of metaphor in understanding our living conditions—which are not, it turns out, infinite, frictionless, or devoid of physical and human constraints. It turns out we have not left our

bodies behind after all. This is the predicament brought home to us since early 2020.

What is repressed in the symbolic, returns in the real; this is a mainstay of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The things that lie unspoken between us will eventually find some alternative physical means of expression. A stammer or an addiction; a fist or a riot; sometimes, a war or even a plague. In Camus' version, what the citizens of the doomed town first notice is the flood of rats that emerge, teeming, from the dark sewers below the city streets. The plague makes visible what we sought to forget.

> It was as if the earth on which our houses were planted was being purged of its secreted humours, thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that, up till then, had been doing their work internally. (1987: 13)

What we sweep under the political carpet, or that lies hidden in the drains and sewers beneath our feet, will come to light in the end. In this case, what has been repressed in the digital symbolic has been the real limits we have long ignored concerning our patterns of consumption, production, material existence, connection, dependence, and so on. COVID-19 has returned those limits to the real, made them apparent for all to see. Metaphors, if they are any good, will turn out to be better than their author's intended use, richer and more ambiguous. The metaphor of the virus turns out to be like that. COVID-19 has connected its metaphorical resonance to its physical presence in our lives, unmasking our vulnerabilities in ways we never imagined.

2 Illness

Albeit in different ways and to different degrees, the coronavirus was in 2020, in 2021, and again in 2022 our 'condition:' our predicament, and our illness. In *Illness as Metaphor,* Susan Sontag notes that in previous eras the greatest moral opprobrium attached to the most terrifying of diseases:

> Epidemic diseases were a common figure for social disorder…
> Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so
> enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world. In the past,
> such grandiloquent fantasies were regularly attached to the epidemic
> diseases, diseases that were a collective calamity. In the last two
> centuries, the diseases most often used as metaphors for evil were
> syphilis, tuberculosis, and cancer—all diseases imagined to be, pre-
> eminently, the diseases of individuals. (1977: 58)

What has been striking about the language of the present epidemic was
that it was *neither* of these two things: it has neither been moralized on
the one hand, nor individualized on the other. COVID-19 is not like
the medieval plague, but it is not like modern day cancer either.

Coronavirus has not, by and large, been the occasion for moral
judgment. We might be subject to a form of public shaming if we
stand too close at the shops or buy up all the pasta. But these are very
minor modes of popular justice compared to the kind of moral meaning
attached in past times to those who caught the plague or the pox or
AIDS. Historically, the terror of dying, and even more the terror of
suffering, have been enlisted to serve some moral purpose that allowed
us to make sense of them. As Sontag rightly points out, the moral
judgment that attached to HIV-AIDS caused the death of millions
of people (1989). But COVID, as a disease, is strangely invisible to
everyday life: the sick don't look any different from the rest of us, and
most of us see almost nothing of the course of the disease or what it
is like to die of it. The very sick were—and still are—hidden away in
hospitals; the rest of us were—and still are—hidden away in our homes.
Out of sight is not necessarily out of mind, but it does not inspire the
drawing of moral lessons.

A caveat is in order. We should never forget how easily COVID-19,
like smallpox and leprosy in the nineteenth century, became a vector
to promote the racist scripts that have been central to colonialism for
centuries. Disease was and continues to be crucial metaphors of racial
superiority and vectors of xenophobic fears (e.g. Bashford 1998, Forth
2017). Exclude Chinese immigrants, they bring smallpox. Ban the
Irish, they're dirty. Pass laws that prohibit Aboriginal people from

crossing the leprosy line. Once again, racist scapegoating in Australia is clearly on the rise. Familiar stereotypes about multicultural and ethnic communities can now be repackaged in the language of public health (Simons 2021; Jiwani 2020). The Australian government's evident indifference to the well-being of international students was surely not unrelated to the fact the so many of them came from China. Universities spent years cultivating a relationship with them, promising not just an economic transaction but a cultural and intellectual exchange. We promised them they would be part of a community. But very early on in the crisis, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told them in no uncertain terms to 'go home' (Gibson & Moran 2020); a crass phrase whose xenophobic subtext was lost on no one. The impact of this moment on Australia's reputation in the global higher education market was and continues to be devastating (Chew 2021).

Nevertheless, in a place like contemporary Australia moral judgment—and this is what makes coronavirus a fitting discourse for late capitalism—does not have the explanatory force it used to. We talk instead about risk assessment. And this is the second point. COVID-19 has not predominantly been imagined as a crisis that befalls individuals. Over the two years it has dominated our daily lives, we have been told little about the experience of living with, or dying from, the disease. No pictures of lesions, swelling, discoloration, disfigurement, or even pain have captured our imaginations. Consider the most famous image to emerge from the crisis. Li Wenliang, a young doctor at Wuhan General Hospital, first sounded the alarm in December 2019. In March 2020, a photo that showed him hooked up to a ventilator, and only hours away from death, appeared on front pages around the world (*Guardian* 2020). But it was not his pain or suffering that held our attention. With his mouth covered by a mask, and holding out an ID card for our inspection, the image of Dr Li reminds us not of his pain but of the government that had tried to muzzle him. The mask and the document operate not just literally but metaphorically. They represent not the implacable horrors of illness but the implacable horrors of bureaucracy.

Indeed, and this makes the current epidemic almost unique in

the annals of medicine, sick individuals have not been the focus of our concern at all. COVID-19 struck down the *rest* of us. We confined the healthy. In Australia, the virus instantly created 1.4 million unemployed, while killing—at last count—about 7,500. This observation is not meant to trivialize the emergency or to conclude, as Giorgio Agamben did (2020), that it was an invention'. The problem is counterfactual: we can point to the people who have died but we can't point to the people who have lived (on excess mortality during 2020 and 2021, see ABS 2022). But the virus is, in our vocabulary and social imaginary, a problem of collective action, a problem of statistics: growth rates, hospital admissions, the basic rate of reproduction. As our government told us on many occasions, the aim was not then and is not now to prevent people getting sick. It is to 'flatten the curve,' that is, to spread its impact over a *longer* period. The problem is not the number of people who are sick. The problem is the number of hospital beds. The problem is infrastructure.

This points to a mode of governance, of populations through data collection of all sorts, that some, drawing on Foucault, consider characteristic of the modern era (e.g. Curtis 2002, Diaz-Bone 2019). Perhaps that overstates its novelty. When England became a colony, way back in 1066, the first thing William the Conqueror did was try and quantify exactly what he'd won. Every farm, every crop, every square productive inch of the land was documented and recorded in one of the great statistical enterprises of medieval times: the Domesday Book. Later, when the colonial tables had well and truly turned, Imperial Britain's great invention was not the rule of law; it was the census. Government by counting.

The pandemic as largely been interpreted collectively and probabilistically. Instead of individual drama or moral indictment, we are offered an assortment of metaphors of disembodiment. The curve and the chain conceive of the problem and the response alike as demographic, statistical. Counting is on the one hand a way of grasping orders of magnitude that are otherwise impossible to fathom. But on the other hand, we avoid the reality of death by turning individual

experiences into statistics. Coronavirus is to the plague what calculus is to geometry: its abstraction. Even the name COVID-19 does not point to a distinctive disease or describe its appearance or character (the black death, smallpox; even cancer gets its name from its supposed resemblance to a crab). The metaphorical and visual aspect of the virus—its 'corona'—is lost beneath a generic acronym followed by a date. The virus is identified as one among many, part of an unending series of data points. The name warns us that this is 'the new normal' and cautions us to expect similar problems and similar restrictions in years to come. The multiple variants that have, since 2020, extended the duration of the epidemic, like a horizon always within view and always out of reach, have proved the point.

The language of treatment, as we have seen, carries through some of these elements of impersonality. Flattening the curve is not something an individual can do. Tracking and tracing locates individuals not because they are sick but because they are components in chains of transmission. The analysis of sewage identifies areas of contamination. All these strategies operate on the level of communities and aim to lower the impact on communities as a whole. At the same time, they echo narrative archetypes deeply embedded in our cultural DNA (Frye 2006). After the Genesis of the virus and its global Exodus, Leviticus—a book of rules and a code of conduct. Then comes Numbers. The numbers will tell us. The epidemic has brought out the actuary in us all. There is nothing new in this. The sciences of risk, probability, and data have been reshaping both government and our own personal lives for many years (Beck 2006). Once again, the pandemic served to bring into focus processes that were already underway. Indeed, the kind of responses it has triggered could scarcely have been imagined without the actuarial studies and big data of the modern world.

3 Metamorphosis

Australia's summer from hell—the 2019 bushfires—and then its years in limbo have together demonstrated just how vital public and community resources are in times of crisis, and how crippled they have

been by government policies over recent years. Local fire services, the media, the ABC, public hospitals, scientific research, unemployment assistance, global institutions and global action: COVID-19, it has been said, has finally put the lie to the politics of austerity; finally demonstrated the importance of the public sphere and community life. Maybe. But there is another way of looking at the political epidemiology of the virus. It might represent the apotheosis of changes that have swept the world over the past thirty years. High unemployment, closed borders, more inequality, less accountability, more executive power (Brown 2015; Agamben 2003). The worry is that coronavirus was not a sign of something new, but a symptom of something that has *already* happened.

Perhaps COVID-19 was not a metaphor for modern times at all, but a metamorphosis. A metamorphosis is a sea change, a profound transformation that appears dramatic only if you have failed to notice the underlying compounds that, like a witch's brew, have been slowly bubbling away. A caterpillar turns into a butterfly. Or think of Ovid— Daphne transformed into a laurel tree. Sometimes the end result is altogether more unpleasant.

> When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach. (2008: 87)

Even in our own strange metamorphosis we can discern traces of colonial history. A biological virus is behaving like political bacteria, colonising public space, corroding the rule of law, emptying our cities, and turning them into a new *terra nullius* (Manderson 2020). It would be wrong to describe this as merely a throwback to the colonial past. Rather, it serves to demonstrate the ties that bind that time to this. Critics have long argued that neoliberalism has weakened civil society and— paradoxically at least at first glance—strengthened governmental power (Whyte 2019; Giroux 2004). Books like Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) and Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015) have connected increasing social isolation with the loss of public spaces and public institutions, the trivialisation of politics, the undermining of democracy, a State which controls every aspect of the lives of certain groups in our

community, and leaves others entirely free. But this story is not new. From colonialism to globalisation to neoliberalism there is not just family resemblance but chains of transmission. Viruses, as we have noted, latch on to existing forms of life while constantly adapting themselves. The title of a recent book by Étienne Balibar, *Mutant Neoliberalism* (2019), is no coincidence. In *Epidemics and Society* (2019), Frank Snowden argues that throughout history, epidemics have been catalysts for profound social change, chief among which has been the expansion and consolidation of governmental power. In the pandemic moment, democracy was put on hold and 'exceptional' government powers were expanded, in ways that may or may not be reversible.

The current crisis advances these trends, but at the same time it has effectively turned the critique on its head. Social distance: used to be considered part of the malaise of modernity. Now we have made a virtue out of necessity. Work from home: convenience and even comfort at the expense of the experience of work as a collective or political activity. Lockdown: a strategy to control disruptive prisoners; now the model of a new civil society. 'The Canberra bubble': once upon a time, a term of abuse, now the return to favour of fantasy of domesticity involving a withdrawal to the cloisters of the nuclear family. The 'real world' is exactly what we are expected to insulate ourselves from. These paradigms all became suddenly more visible and normatively legitimate in 2020 but it is clear that they have not gone away.

The fragmentation of public space and our alienation from social life has been transformed from a political calamity into a public good. We should stay away from one another. We should retreat to the nuclear family and shelter in place. Exercise locally, shop online. Avoid demonstrations. Avoid public meetings. Who needs decent working conditions when your employers have requisitioned your home or 'uberized' your career? Who needs restaurants when you have Deliveroo? Who needs a local theatre when you have Netflix? Who needs newspapers? Who needs schools? The world echoes to the sound of various last nails being hammered into assorted coffins. COVID-19 is not a metaphor for what happens next. It is metamorphosis or mutation:

the denouement, the big reveal, the smoke from a gun that has already gone off. If you can't hear it, try removing your ear plugs.

The images and tropes around us do not simply *represent* power. As the French historian Louis Marin wrote (1988: 3), they 'valorise' it, legitimating underlying social, political, and economic structures, and 'modalise' it, bringing them more fully to everyday life. The long-term effect of COVID-19 might just be to valorise and modalise the fragmented, insular, privatised world of neoliberalism, *and* the authoritarian state that shields it from political scrutiny. The point is not tendentious. Friedrich Hayek, the philosophical godfather of the neoliberal mafia, is on record as saying that he would prefer a liberal dictatorship to a democracy lacking liberalism (El Mercurio 1981; see also Selwyn 2015; Hayek 1966): he meant, one that favoured public welfare. COVID-19 has brought his dream closer than ever.

4 Crisis

Admittedly, the picture is more complicated than that. In the early months of 2020, stories of the resilience of communities and the provision of moral and material support to those in need poured in from around the world: street parties on balconies in Italy, serenading the NHS in Britain. But this rosy picture has faded whereas the long-term weakening of public space and public life has not. The uncertainty of the current predicament is what makes this a true *krisis* in the original Greek sense of the word: that moment in the course of a disease which indicates that a profound transformation is taking place, signifying either recovery or death (see Brown 2006: 5). The crisis of a disease is its turning point, its moment of truth—when both possibilities are in play and the outcome hangs in the balance. As Sontag pointed out, the metaphorical wars of recent times have owed a lot to the dominant discourse of disease: poverty, or drugs, or corruption were 'cancers' that had by definition to be cut out, or otherwise obliterated by violent and invasive methods. Not to mention Jews or immigrants or communists; the usual suspects. But the wars of the 21st century look like being *for* things, not *against* them: for communities, for peoples, for the

environment; for the planet. We will need metaphors to match.

A year or two ago I imagined, altogether too naively, that the vaccine might be the metaphor to come. But events since then have led to a waning of optimism in the possibility of a magic bullet against such an ever-shifting target as the current virus; and a waxing of pessimism at the capacity of our highly fractious political community to polarize even something as apparently innocuous as inoculation. There will be no easy way out, no consensus that metaphor might build. Yet if in 2022 a vaccine has become, symbolically, just another flashpoint for conflict and suspicion, it nevertheless, materially, still contains the potential to inspire new possibilities for thinking about social relations. As several authors in this collection have already noted, Lakoff and Johnson famously mused about the difference it might make if the war-like metaphors that currently dominate how we talk about argument, were replaced by dance-like ones instead (1980: 4-5). In that spirit, we might yet ask what it would mean to think about the future with the aid of metaphors of vaccination.

A vaccine is a way of undoing the colonizing power of the virus. We agree to be jabbed not only because it protects us from disease but because it protects those around us. Falling vaccination rates around the world may in part reflect the power of neoliberal ideology to unravel the social contract, to reduce public goods and social value to individual calculations and economic value. But the current crisis, by clarifying what is at stake for billions of people, might yet undermine that trend. Margaret Thatcher declared that there was no such thing as society. On the contrary, the vaccine is a metaphor that both proves its value and demonstrates its necessity. As opposed to the metaphors of the bubble and the lockdown and social distance and masks, immunity does not come from isolation but from connection. Above all, vaccines work by activating the body's own immune system. They protect us by developing bio-medical resources we already possess. By making ourselves a little bit sick in the short term, our body improves its resilience in the long term. This imaginary, seeking to promote internal and productive responses rather than external and destructive ones,

might give us a new language of response, new ways of conceiving of the problems we face and the solutions we need: in short, a new and decidedly non-Hobbesian way of thinking about 'the body politic'.

The current pandemic has demonstrated, and the metaphor of the vaccine reminds us, of the ways in which our self-interest *depends* on the welfare of others; the ways in which economic insecurity in the developing world can suddenly translate into empty supermarket shelves and collapsing industries; the ways in which the economic prosperity and standard of living of each individual one of us is ultimately dependent on a whole range of public goods from higher education and universal health care, to decent welfare systems, to affordable child care. We have learnt how much these things matter, not just to each of us individually, but to all of us together.

Social policies that seemed unimaginable until recently—universal basic income schemes, publicly funded childcare, or a four-day working week—are suddenly on the table. What Prime Minister Morrison dismissed as 'unfunded empathy' (see Murphy 2019) has suddenly become a fundamental national responsibility. In many countries (though not in Australia) the language of resilience has led to a significant turn to renewable energy and sustainable agriculture. In the UK, the promotion of walking, cycling, and even e-scooters—all in the name of public health—has left many onlookers scarcely able to believe their eyes. One of the sectors most dangerously depleted by the current pandemic has been tertiary education. Yet there is a greater possibility of rethinking higher education, including recognising its public and social value, than at any time in the past fifty years.

The current form of the world economy had its origin in the colonial period, extended and intensified through globalisation and under the influence of the neoliberal hegemony. Coronavirus has exposed its fragile and exploitative character as never before. Metaphors that speak in the language of resilience, sustainability, and 'future-proofing', invite new ways of conceiving of the interdependence of social and economic relations around the world. The use of sweatshops to do our dirty work, might start to seem not only unethical but inadvisable. So might the

destruction of ecosystems in order to feed our insatiable hunger for fuel or cash crops. As to factory farming, their role in the mutation and spread of viruses might succeed where moral arguments have failed (Wallace 2016). Perhaps most importantly, COVID-19 illuminates how these and many other issues are interconnected. Inoculating ourselves against the diseases to come will not be a medical problem but a social problem, in which the health of everyone and the health of the environment matter to us all. Like popping steroids without addressing underlying conditions and lifestyle choices, the complacent return to a morbid normality only leaves us enervated, depleted, and vulnerable to be carried off by the next wave of infection. COVID-19 has opened a space to seriously examine, at long last, the major issues confronting us.

There is no guarantee that the current crisis will actually lead to new language and new ideas. It would not be a crisis if we knew how it ended. But we have been vouchsafed a dreadful opportunity not to 'snap back' but to snap out of it. More important than the damage the pandemic has done is the damage it has made visible, what truth of the human condition has bubbled up to the surface. That truth appears above all to be the human responsibility we each of us bear for the fragility of us all. As Camus wrote,

> Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know too that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. (1987: 204)

We are all killers. This has been brought home to us in a quite direct way by the experiences of the 2020s. The lives of others depend on our hand washing, our distance, our careless breath. Less directly but yet undeniably, our responsibility for the lives of others reaches out to encircle the globe. In the years to come, there will be no forgetting it and no escaping it. Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble.

Endnotes

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