Metaphors in progress

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THE new coronavirus has given rise to an abundance of metaphors, all of them involving a major move away from the contexts in which such metaphors are commonly used. This, in itself, tells us a lot about the shock and astonishment generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The metaphors are but an attempt to tame the virus *qua* phenomenon. It is not an easy task, given that we are not even sure whether the virus is a natural or a social phenomenon.

Metaphors are a call to reality, an attempt to frame the virus in terms that we are able to grasp at the social, philosophical and cultural level. Far from being arbitrary, metaphors are intentional. They point to different types of action and conjure up different post-pandemic societies. I distinguish three metaphors: the virus as enemy, the virus as messenger, and the virus as pedagogue.

The virus as enemy is the favorite metaphor of governments. War falls, as it always will, within the exclusive competence of the state. Among all the tasks performed by the state, it is the one around which the broadest consensus can be found. The enemy metaphor is a double metaphor, in that it conceives of the fight against the virus as a war, and of the virus as the enemy to be beaten. The war metaphor is effective in its conveying of the gravity of the threat and the patriotic need for unity in the fight against that threat. This call for unity is especially useful in states recently hit by widespread social protests, as is the case with France (and the *gilets jaunes*

demonstrations). War presupposes the use of extreme combat measures. It promotes a simplistic political narrative, of the 'you're either with us or against us' type. An enemy is not to be persuaded or argued against, but to be eliminated.

The enemy metaphor suffers from two main biases. On the one hand, it looks at anti-pandemic measures as coming exclusively from the state. But the fight against the pandemic also enlists the staunch participation of families, communities, associations and, first and foremost, the health care providers, whose sense of mission is not restricted by their obligations as civil servants. On the other hand, this metaphor suggests that, once the war is won, everything will go back to normal.

Now, in all likelihood that will not be the case, not only because final victory sounds like a very uncertain outcome, but also because, were such victory ever to happen, the new normal will be quite different from what it used to be. Most of all, it is highly likely that the virus will not be eliminated, but rather tamed or neutralized by vaccines and the antibodies we'll end up producing. In the end, maybe the war will never be won, and the best outcome we can hope for is a temporary, conditional truce.

Over the past fifty years, the war metaphor has been widely used in the western world – with the U.S. at its head – to denote the perception of the gravity of the perils threatening to destroy it. If history serves as a lesson, those were designed as permanent or even perpetual wars. Such has been the case with the war against communism, even though communism no longer exists in the world, not even in China, where state capitalism is now the law of the land. The same applies to the war on terrorism, the war on drugs and, in more recent times, the war on corruption. None of these wars has come to an end yet, nor are they expected to do so in the near future.

Will it be the same with the war against the pandemic? Interestingly enough, the war against recent pandemics (HIV-AIDS or Ebola) shares with other permanent wars the fact that it is an irregular war. The enemy is elusive and deceptive. It has no regard for the laws of war, eschews conventional tactics, and will not be effectively opposed unless the fight against it is waged with identical means. Is the war against the Covid-19 pandemic a new war, to be added to the list of permanent or eternal wars? We do know that the war will not end until vaccines are made widely available. Until that happens, we will go through a period of what I describe as intermittent pandemic. Even with a vaccine, however, and unless our current model of development, consumption and civilization is altered, other pandemics are highly likely to strike. Therefore, we may well be facing another permanent war.

Such a possibility should be cause for concern, and not just because it means the recurrence of ever more frequent and more lethal viruses. In fact, the abovementioned permanent wars have served those who declare them in achieving ends that have nothing to do with the ends they declared. Those wars have served, before anything else, to neutralize political opponents and exert control over areas of geostrategic influence. Will the war against the virus lend itself to such a use? Some disturbing signs can be discerned. Viewed against the backdrop of the world's major powers (USA, China and the European Union), the war against the pandemic is part of the war for geostrategic hegemony waged between China and the USA.

Aside from everything else, the war metaphor has a negative impact on the democratic life of a society engaged in the fight against the virus. War times are exceptional times, when orders are to be obeyed, not debated. There is no room for reasoning or for coming up with alternatives. After all, unconditional obedience is supposed to be for our own good, and if we do not obey, we put our lives, not to mention the lives of others, at risk. The war places an overwhelming pressure on citizenship. This pressure will not be fatal as long as it is short-lived. But what if it isn't?

In short, the war and enemy metaphor does not help us imagine a better society, *i.e.*, one that is more diverse with regard to intercultural experiences, more democratic, more equal, more just, and less exposed to lethal viruses like the present one. This metaphor expresses a death drive directed against the death threat posed by the virus. It pits death against death, telling us nothing about the possibility and desirability of a no-war scenario. Given all the above, it does not strike me as very useful. Things could be different if the war and enemy metaphor were to be deconstructed so as to let us see and understand the enemies in this war. After all, it stands to reason that if the virus is the enemy of society, then maybe society is the enemy of the virus.

It would therefore be wise to follow the example of war photographer Karim Ben Khelifa, as presented in his remarkable documentary *The Enemy*.[1] After 15 years as a war photographer, he began to question the usefulness of his photos, since they totally failed to change people's attitudes toward the war and make them desire peace. He came to the conclu-

1. Available at http://theenemyishere.org/, consulted on 25 April 2020.

sion that one of the reasons was perhaps the fact that enemies remained invisible. So he decided to make the combatants visible, by giving them a voice and allowing them to introduce themselves and explain their motives, dreams and fears. By resorting to advanced communication technologies, he allowed the point of view of enemies to confront the point of view of those fighting on the opposite side. With that, enemies ceased to be enemies.

Would we be able to do the same in the case of the war against the virus? How can one make nano-entities visible? How can we begin to know their reasons for attacking us and their points of view about the society in which we live? And were that possible, what reasons would we provide for trying to eliminate or at least neutralize them? Would it be possible to compare motives and points of view, and even be talked into substantially altering our ways of life? Would it then be possible to establish, not just a truce, but true coexistence based on more civilized behaviour from both sides? Despite Karim Ben Khelifa's remarkable endeavour, the sad fact is that war is war, and it is all about killing and getting killed.

The second metaphor conceives of the virus as a messenger – a messenger from nature, for sure. According to this metaphor, the specific content or details of the message are irrelevant, for the message resides in the virus's very presence. It is a performative message. It is also a horrible message, because it spells death or the threat of death. This message leaves us with the question of what to do with the messenger. In eastern tradition, and in China in particular, there used to be an unspoken agreement whereby a messenger sent by any of the warring parties would travel unarmed and at no personal risk. In western tradition, on the other hand, there is a long, recurring history, going all the way back to ancient Egypt and Greece, of messengers getting killed for being the bearers of bad news. Because of that recurrence, the phrase 'kill the messenger' has become a cultural *topos* and a form of political tactics.

In his *Lives*, Plutarchus tells the story of Tigranes, who, upset by the news that Lucullus was about to arrive, murdered the messenger to mitigate his own distress. In Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*, the latter threatens to gouge out the eyes of the messenger who brings her the news that Antony had married Octavius Caesar's sister, Octavia. The 'kill the messenger' topos is still very much present today. Suffice it to consider the way Julian Assange has been treated (slowly murdered is perhaps how we ought to put it) for bringing so many bad messages to the powerful of the world.

'Kill the messenger' is the operative cultural archetype in the case of the virus-as-messenger metaphor. Granted, a small number of those who resort to this metaphor favour it over the enemy metaphor precisely because they are intent on understanding the message, no matter how painful it may be. However, in the context of public discourse, even when the virus-as-messenger metaphor is used, not a single minute is spent in the attempt to decode it. The panic or terror over the performative message (death or death threat) is such that no attempt is made to investigate the cause of death, as would be the case with any criminal investigation or detective novel. All follow-up action is a *non sequitur* with regard to the meaning of the message. As far as society is concerned, it is enough to dislike the news brought by the virus. It does not attempt to confront it, much less face the probable reasons behind it. Instead, it concentrates every effort on killing the messenger.

For this reason, the virus-as-messenger metaphor does not strike me as helpful in terms of allowing us to prevent the future occurrence of new messengers, possibly carrying even more terrifying news. Like the enemy metaphor, the messenger metaphor focuses on eliminating this virus. It can prove useful to defend us in the present, but not to defend us in the future.

My personal preference goes to the virus-as-pedagogue metaphor, the only one that requires us to try to understand the virus and the underlying motives for its behaviour and, as a result, to try and organize social responses aimed at reducing the probability of being intruded upon in such an unwelcome way by future viruses. To conceive of the virus as a pedagogue is to confer upon it a dignity far superior to that bestowed by the preceding metaphors. For the war metaphor, the virus is an enemy to be beaten; and as to the messenger metaphor, it views the virus as a carrier with no significant role in the rivalries at play. As a carrier, it will certainly only tell us what the messenger told Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play: 'Gracious madam, / I that do bring the news made not the match.'

The pedagogue metaphor is the only one that makes us interact with the virus, as it turns it into a subject worthy of holding a dialogue with us. It is certainly a cruel pedagogue, who does not waste time explaining the reasons for its behaviour and simply acts as it is supposed to act. But it is not an irrational being. It had its own reasons for coming to us at this point and in the way it did. Therefore, we must try to think about it so that we will gradually be able to think with it, until we can finally start thinking from its point of view.

Thus, I propose a diatopic hermeneutics of a new kind, poised between human rationality and viral rationality, an interpretation of the world located between two different conceptions of life and of the relations between society and nature, in the hope of reaching, through mutual concessions or transformations, points of convergence leading to a coexistence between humans and non-humans. The hermeneutics in question is aimed at learning from the virus and transferring what we learn from it onto society. Thus viewed, it amounts to an intervital pedagogy, halfway between human and non-human life.

It will not be an easy pedagogy to embrace. Difficulties abound at many levels. Is it possible to learn from someone we have never seen or will ever see? Learning from the virus will always mean tele-, or remote, learning. How is that different from the revelations of divinity to be found in many religions? Besides, is society open to learning? I actually think that most people see the virus as a nightmare from which they want to awake as fast as possible. In that case, the drive to forget will be stronger than the drive to learn. On the other hand, if we agree, as I have been arguing, that we must learn from the virus,[2] the learning process will run into huge obstacles.

The best pedagogical theories teach us that all learning must be co-learning, *i.e.*, reciprocal learning aimed at mutual education. Even if we are open to learning from the virus, how can we know whether the virus wants to learn from us? Suppose we apply Paulo Freire's theory – the justly celebrated pedagogy of the oppressed – to such learning. In this situation, who is the oppressed – we or the virus?

All these difficulties notwithstanding, I believe that the virus-as-pedagogue metaphor presents us with a task at once viable and urgent. We must start by engaging in deep listening with the virus. Dominant western knowledge has never taught us how to listen deeply to anything.[3] It has only taught us how to hear, but hearing is the poorest and most superficial form of listening. To hear is to allow oneself to understand only that which we deem relevant, whether pleasant or unpleasant. It is problematic, because it is subject to our interests of the moment. In fact, since we are the dominant part in the act of listening, we only hear and value what interests us.

When conducting interviews, all a sociologist or a journalist does is hear. If the interviewee starts to talk about what truly interests or upsets her, she will only be heard if it coincides with the interviewer's own interests. Everything else is irrelevant, no matter how vital it may be for the interviewee.

How does one effect a deep listening of the virus? First of all, we must consider that the virus may well be saying things that only sound unintelligible because we cannot, or will not, understand them. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the virus is a natural being; the difficulties involved in deep listening are particularly debilitating in the context of Eurocentric culture. The way in which Eurocentric human beings have been formatted by it has rendered them unable to listen to nature and willing to observe the latter only when it gives them pleasure (landscape contemplation) or when they derive some sort of advantage from it (appropriation of natural resources, raw materials). Deep listening entails a much greater effort: daring to decipher and to comprehend.

But how are we to communicate with the virus? In what tongue or language? With its infecting and killing, the virus seems to excel in factual language. To engage in argument with it, aiming at an outwardly similar language, will result in neutralizing or killing it. But in that case there will be nothing to learn, and we will end up in the realm of the war and enemy metaphor. In order to learn from the virus, we need to take a step further. We must not limit ourselves to what it tells us, but rather try to find out what it wishes to tell us and why.

Having reached this point, we need to be able to build a translation bridge or platform between human and viral language. This has nothing to do with mere linguistic translation. I am talking about intercultural translation, to be carried out between the human culture of the infected and the dead, the culture of the health care providers who tend to them, the scientific culture of those studying viruses, and the natural culture of the infectious, lethal agent. It is a highly complex task, made worse by that fatal vice to which humans are so prone: anthropocentrism.

The vice consists in conceiving of the world in our own image, and thus projecting motives onto the virus as if it were one of us. The problem is that, if we do that, we will learn but what we already know, which is nothing. It is therefore imperative to start from the assumption that the virus does not think like us, but rather like a virus. And although it terrifies us, we must comfort ourselves with the idea that, in this respect, we are superior to it. The virus is incapable of imagining that it is possible to think differently than the way it thinks.

How is intervital translation possible, given the unbridgeable gap

2. *A Cruel Pedagogia do Vírus* ('The Cruel Pedagogy of the Virus'). Almedina, Coimbra, 2020; Boitempo, São Paulo, 2020.

3. As I have argued in *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2018, pp. 165-183.

between our language and that of the virus? We might even imagine that we and the virus live in separate universes. Such a hypothesis is likely to please the proponents of the notion of a pluriverse – *i.e.*, the notion that, even among humans, differences sometimes can be of such magnitude that they are simply beyond compare, for they belong to different universes. The problem with this notion is that it makes it impossible to even start to compare the differences, for they belong to universes that are incommensurable. If comparing is impossible, then learning is even less possible. But is it acceptable to see as belonging to a distinct universe a being that is so close to – if not already inside – us, and which poses such an existential threat to us that it leads us to paralysis and forces us to retreat to the innermost caves of our intimacy, where we still fail to feel one hundred percent safe?

The notion of co-presence can be more productive than that of a pluriverse. As unfathomable as the virus may be, its presence in our midst is frighteningly unequivocal. We are, therefore, co-present, and that is the basis upon which communication should be established. In addition to the difficulties inherent in intervital translation, a semiotic code needs to be developed in order to invest co-presence with meaning. Such a code can only be signal-based communication. We have already seen that infection and potential death are the signs of the virus. The whys and wherefores of the signs will only remain opaque as long as the virus is viewed, as I did above, as a natural entity. But is that really the case? What if it is more human than we think?

I am not referring to the conspiracy theories that claim the virus was created in a laboratory. I am talking about something far more substantive and with far greater consequences. I am talking about the fact that the virus is a co-creation of humans and nature, a co-creation that is a product of the way in which men have interfered with natural processes, especially since the 16th century. This long time span coincides with that of modern capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

The unfettered exploitation of natural resources, combined with the appropriation of, and discrimination against, everything that was viewed as being close to the natural world – slaves, women, indigenous peoples – interfered with nature to such a degree that we now view nature, to a large extent, as a product of that interference. In this light, nature is as human as we are, even if in a radically different way. Under this conception, the virus may be said to mirror Goethe's *Faust* or *Los Caprichos*, by Goya, according to whom '*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*' ('The sleep of reason produces monsters').

Thus, the virus is in fact as human as can be, with a humanity that is radically *other* than the humanity we attribute to ourselves. The signs sent out by the virus are no longer opaque but rather transparent, if we bear in mind that the human being who now is getting infected by it is the same person who has been infecting and abusing nature for centuries. The two processes are tightly interwoven. Communication is possible in this case; translation and pedagogy are still intercultural, but cease to be intervital in order to become intravital.

The virus becomes our contemporary in the deepest sense. To that extent, signal-based communication becomes possible because, as we know, it is the precondition of such communication that the same visual field be shared. Where communication is possible, learning becomes possible too.