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Viral Resistance: How to Survive a Pan(dem)ic

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He rides back home after one of his solo bike tours. He usually avoids biking through parks at night; he associates it with danger. Tonight, he changes course. It's a breezy night with a clear sky, and the moon faintly lights the path. He hears some beats coming from somewhere in the park. He follows the sounds. It becomes clear, as he cycles, that it is music, techno music to be exact. In a corner lined with trees, a rave is going on. Groups of people gathering around several music boxes. A rave, secret and spontaneous. No lining up, bouncers, or guest lists. He recognizes familiar queer faces in the crowd. Some are dancing, some kissing, others laughing. Suddenly the police arrive. They step out of their wagons, moving mechanically like robots because of their heavy protective gear. They circle the crowd. A voice comes out of a speaker ordering to evacuate the space, but the crowd doesn't seem phased. The dancing continues, perhaps more defiantly. The tension rises. The police direct a large spotlight on the crowd and turn it on. The entire space is revealed. The crowd bursts into applause and cheers.

This is only one of the many surreal scenes in 2020, the year in which one of the science fiction worst-case scenarios came true. A global pandemic. An event that both connects us and tears us apart. "It was the loneliest year," a friend told me during a phone call, at one of the phases where I felt energized enough to check in with friends, distant and near. It wasn't only a year of isolation and loneliness; rather, it was one where various forms of coming-together, including mass protests, demonstrations and revolts.

This text begins with a story about a form of coming together. A rave. The police put the ravers under the spotlight to reveal and intimidate them. In contrast, my spotlight asks questions about how to survive a pandemic, based on the lived experience of a queer exiled body. I break away from biomedical narratives about pandemics to give attention to the social life of disease. I focus on the untold histories of pandemics, grounding my analysis in transnational and transtemporal understandings of how power is reproduced and certain narratives take center stage regarding global disease. Politics, media, science, and the self are the targets of this text, for they are the forces we come up against when faced with disease.

Lessons from history

1. We could safely call 2020 the year of the global pandemic. Yet, other major events took place. Large-scale mobilization for freedom, democracy, and justice began or continued. Following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the United States witnessed the largest demonstrations in the country's history, as part of Black Lives Matter movement that reverberated in many places around the world. Other mass protests took place in Myanmar, Poland, Belarus, Chile, Colombia, Tunisia, Lebanon, Palestine, Greece, Turkey, and the list goes on. Is there a relationship between pandemic and dissent, and in what ways?

2. Beyond the biomedical discourse of risk and disease, epidemics are social events. Quarantine was introduced in the 14th century when the plague was raging across Europe. The word Quarantine refers to the 40-day period of isolation of ships and people practiced as a measure to control the plague. Quarantine evolved through history. The historian Khaled Fahmy (2021) shows how

Mohamed Ali, the Ottoman governor of Egypt in the beginning of 19th century, used quarantine to enforce social control and stifle the dissent of Egyptians.

3. The coronavirus lockdown brought restrictions on movement across the world. At a certain phase of the pandemic, leaving my home in Berlin was allowed only for a valid reason, work, shopping or practicing sport. My friend, a Pakistani migrant living in Stuttgart, the industrial German south, told me however that he never stopped going to the factory. That was the situation of millions of workers around the world who had to continue their labor, signaling the indifference of major businesses to lockdown measures, while simultaneously profiting from the lockdown business model.

4. Police forces were dispatched to enforce the social distancing rules. I felt anxious about the possibility of police controls, especially when I broke the measures to visit a friend. The intimacy of friendship was legally prohibited. My anxiety was heightened since the address on my ID papers didn't match my actual address, a sign of migrant life precarity in Berlin. One time, I was sitting with two friends at a park, 2 meters apart. The police came and sent us home. Meeting with others who didn't belong to the same household was illegal. There were 6 police officers crammed in the van. Yet, they told us we were the ones breaking social distancing rules.

5. Those experiences with racial profiling remind me of the narratives of refugees I worked with at a Cairo-based refugee support organization, especially during the lockdown imposed after 2011 revolution. Refugees were the first targets of xenophobic rhetoric propagated by the collapsing dictatorship and its media apparatus. Being a refugee in Berlin, I could feel and see the lockdown in a different light. In this context, police and the military are dispatched to control public space and provide alleged safety, a safety that only makes me feel more vulnerable. Back then, it was done in the name of national security. This time, it is done in the name of public health.

6. In one of the countless of talks I joined on Zoom, I listened to historian Christopher Rose (2021) speak about the Spanish flu pandemic in Egypt. The pandemic killed 2% of the Egyptian population between 1918 and 1920. Other details are harder to obtain, which could be explained by the media keeping a low profile of the cases. In fact, it was called the Spanish flu since Spain freely reported on the matter in its press, in contrast to the media blackout enforced around the world. Rose spoke of a correlation between the pandemic and the revolution that swept Egypt in 1919. In urban centers, the revolt centered political questions of freedom and rights. In the countryside, the villagers were fed up with forced conscriptions, deterioration of agriculture, and soaring hunger. The demonstrations were animated by rage and fear in the face of colonizers exploiting the villagers and their lands, and on top of it all bringing diseases from faraway lands. Revolution is often seen as an act of hope. Perhaps despair, triggered by closeness to disease and death, brings a life force to dissenting masses. Despair and hope may seem as two distinct affects, but I believe they are two sides of the same coin.

7. I always wondered if my ancestors were part of past revolutions. I grew up in a small town in Upper Egypt called Minya. As a child, I remember joining the celebrations on March 18, chosen as Minya's Day. Nationalistic songs played, and the flag of the Minya, block green with the bust of Nefertiti in its center, was raised. We commemorated the role played by the villagers against the British during the 1919 revolution. Villagers cut off the railway set up by the British to transport cotton and other goods from the Egyptian south. They then set fire to the train, killing dozens of British soldiers. I wonder how members of my family experienced the Spanish flu, and whether they took part in the revolt. But there is no archive for those villagers living under colonial feudalism in the early 20th century. Education runs only two generations back in my family. This ancestral inquiry remains unanswered because knowing one's ancestors is a hidden form of privilege.

Science and its discontents

1. Every time I see the faces of epidemiologists on the covers of magazines, instead of politicians and megastars, I ask myself: is a pandemic the virologists' wildest dream?

2. On another bike tour in Berlin during the summer of 2020, I took the main road leading to the Brandenburger Tor, Berlin's symbolic monument. To my surprise, the road was blocked with protesters. I saw a rainbow flag, so I assumed it was a queer demonstration. Out of curiosity, I stepped off my bike and walked through the crowds. There were all sorts of flags, but my heart started pounding when I saw the German flags. Needless to expound on the horrors of German nationalism. As it turned out, it was a demo of the Querdenker movement (lateral thinkers), which held regular mass protests against lockdown measures. Querdenkers are a broad coalition of right- and left-wing movements, representing concerns around infringements on personal rights and freedom of movement, often coupled with conspiratorial theories. Signs against evil big pharma, Bill Gates microchips, and travel restrictions stood side by side with antisemitic symbols, pro-peace messages, and anti-Merkel slogans.

3. When I arrived in Germany in late 2014, there were similar demonstrations protesting the so-called Islamisation of the West, also known as the *refugee crisis in mainstream media*. This Pegida movement also declared Merkel traitor of the nation for her presumed open-door policy (when in fact Merkel had tightened asylum laws at the time). The sense of disenfranchisement and marginalization expressed by Pegida in 2015 echoes the anti-lockdown movement. Querdenker movement seems to be an extension of Pegida, or at least its 2020 version. This crisis of governance shows that liberal democracy, as practiced today, is in fact an oligarchy.

4. In response to Querdenkers, liberal politicians and mainstream media emphasized rationality and science. My colleagues and circles applauded Merkel in a gesture of unquestioned obedience to lockdown rules.

5. I could relate to some of the affects animating the lateral thinking movement, particularly questioning the interests of the pharmaceutical industry and big government. At its core, there seemed to be an anti-authority stance. This sense of relatedness to a movement, that also called for my annihilation, was one of the most perplexing feelings I experienced during the pandemic.

6. There is an Arabic expression, *caught between two fires.* The English version says, "between two stools, one falls to the ground." As a person who grew up under a dictatorship, survived a revolution, and lives in exile in Germany, I feel dejected that *lateral thinking* has been hijacked. In a time of pandemic, healthy skepticism, questions about establishment science, about who produces and consumes which knowledge, are necessary.

7. Storming office buildings, road blocks, and throwing bombs made up of artificial blood were tactics employed by ACT UP movement, to fight for treatment and support for people affected by the HIV epidemic. The group used a series of direct actions against health institutions and pharma companies (Schulman 2021). Through networks of health professionals and researchers they exerted pressure to counter the negligence and bias of establishment science to the HIV epidemic.

8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) posits that paranoia, and in extension conspiratorial thinking, is a tenet of leftist analysis. She proposes reparative reading as the way forward. Epidemiologists tell the story of epidemic, but the way in which such an event is touched and felt must be expanded.

Isolation is not your fault

1. I live alone in Berlin. It seemed the reasonable thing to do after having lived in refugee camps where privacy was not an option. I also had my share of oppressive flatmate situations, with its cultural clashes and unequal power dynamics. That single-apartment constellation is no oddity in Berlin. One-third of the city's apartments are inhabited by one person. For many, this means a struggle with loneliness and isolation. I was always on the fence about living alone. Sometimes, I love it. I can be tidy or messy. I can be productive or procrastinate. A room of one's own, as per Virginia Woolf (1929), was an ideal condition for a writer, in her treatise exploring the gendered conditions for free expression. Other times, I feel too lonely; it doesn't feel natural to be alone. Sometimes it feels like falling for the ultimate trap of toxic individualism.

2. Before the coronavirus, social distancing was the norm in Berlin public space. You live anonymously with meager contact in the neighborhood or with people sharing the same building. There is hardly any random contacts with strangers. Those little pleasantries, an exchange in a queue, or a random person throwing a compliment. These tiny exchanges make life in cities feel more tolerable, safer, and more welcoming. Life in Berlin, and perhaps other megametropoles, is structured in a way that encourages us to only socialize with our own, in carefully networked and choreographed events.

Stay with your kin. Do not cross the class lines. There was always social distance. It has just been re-designated at a distance of 1.5 meters.

3. I bike in front of one of my favorite bars in the city. Through the glass, the empty seats and dusty tables look unusual and sad. There was a sign on the door; a quote from Schopenhauer, a German philosopher, known for his pessimism. “What makes people sociable is their inability to bear loneliness and to carry themselves in loneliness.” I imagine who hung the sign, and wonder what they were thinking. I am all for philosophical relief as a coping mechanism, but reading the sign, I feel victim-blamed. My desire for intimacy rewritten into an inability to be with the self.

4. Since I arrived in Germany, I developed a new form of anxiety: mailbox-induced anxiety. It is marked by considerable trepidation as I open the mailbox. You never know what might be coming at you. A decision that asylum was rejected. A hefty invoice for something you didn’t understand because your German skills are not good enough. In November, I found a letter in the mailbox from the mayor of Berlin. November 2020 had been declared the month of Individual Responsibility. Isn’t every day a day of Individual Responsibility in the liberal industrialized western nation?

5. If we stick to the rules, we will celebrate Christmas, a promise Merkel made in her speech. Why was she talking to us as if we were children?, I asked a friend in a bout of frustration. But people are acting like children, he responds. I don’t like his answer.

6. The German governments made a lockdown exception for Christmas. They permitted celebrations in the “closest family circle.” Meetings with 4 people from the immediate family beyond one’s household plus children were allowed. For everyone else, the five-persons-from-two-households rule continued to apply. The word household has been used since the beginning of the pandemic. Only at Christmas the oppressiveness of the term was asserted. Regulations are made with a heteronuclear family in mind. A queer family wasn’t part of the picture. COVID-Christmas was for blood families; forget about chosen family.

The media is not always your friend

1. Hasenheide (Rabbit Heath) is the park where the rave was raided by the police. The green spot served as a hunting ground for royalty in the 17th century. In the 19th century, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the founder of the German gymnastic movement, set up the first gymnastic space in Germany on that spot. His way of raising the spirit of his countrymen was to promote their physical strength, in order to counter the sense of defeat imposed by the French occupation of Germany. Jahn was part of a larger nationalist movement that helped win over France. His ideals of a perfect physique are said to inspire Nazi imaginaries of a perfect Aryan Übermensch. In 1936, the space was turned into a park.

2. Like many parks in Berlin, Hasenheide has an FKK (nudist) corner, an area where people enjoy naked sunbathing. These corners act as a space for queer sociality. Particularly opportune is that the corner lies adjacent to a maze of bushes, making it perfect for cruising adventures, offering immediate sex encounters. After the initial shock of the first few months of the pandemic, queers started gathering in the space, encouraged by the summer sun.

3. Secretive get-togethers in Germany, especially private ones, soon became the focus of cultural politics. Media and pundits called them corona-parties. In the summer of 2020, a local TV station used a hidden camera to capture one of those raves. The report sparked outrage, as the ravers were portrayed as irresponsible and reckless, emphasizing drug use and indifference to the lockdown measures.

4. In the following weeks, the numbers of ravers, as well as the numbers of the police forces, increased. The latter used helicopters, batons, trained dogs, and physical violence to evacuate the park. In other parts of Berlin, they showed up in cruising areas. Privately-held gatherings were also raided, with the police exhibiting homophobic and xenophobic attitudes and practices. They used COVID-19 control measures, protection of green spaces, as well as neighbor complaints as grounds for the raids.

5. These accounts of police raids on queer spaces in Berlin eerily stirred my emotional archive of homophobic violence in Egypt. In 2014, a media reporter used a hidden camera to reveal gay sex taking place in a public bathhouse in Cairo (EIPR 2014). Under the pretense of fighting the HIV epidemic and "sex trafficking," the reporter called the police to raid the bathhouse, leading to the arrest of around 25 people with debauchery charges, the vague legal term under which queer and trans bodies are prosecuted in Egypt. The peering eye of media apparatus revealing what was not meant to be revealed, inciting homophobic violence, is a well-known, recurrent story.

6. In a pandemic, the violent dynamics of repressive settings are reproduced, even in countries that brag about openness and tolerance of marginal lifestyles and sexualities. Spaces of queer sociality become sites of moral panics. In the wake of the HIV epidemic, gay saunas were permanently closed, and in some cases burned down.

7. In addition to queer spaces, the media focused on other hotspots of viral panic, such as Muslim weddings and housing projects for Roma people. A pandemic reveals the true structure of society; it sheds light on bodies marked with disease, threatening the body of the nation, through their excess in the case of queer intimacies, or impurity in the case of racial minorities.

Fear is the enemy

1. I talk about sex for a living. In other words, I work as a psychosocial counselor at a sexual health center in Berlin. On my day to day, I counsel people coming to inquire about their sexual health

status. After years of doing this job, certain patterns and questions recur. A central scenario includes a person who reports a risky encounter, where they feel regret they haven't used necessary precautions. They typically describe symptoms or bodily changes developed after the contact. Some go online and research their symptoms, getting more anxious as they self-diagnose. They eventually come to the office to face their anxieties and reach some clarity. The majority tests negative for everything, while a small minority turns out to have an infection.

2. "Sex begets punishment"; a message so deeply rooted in our minds, it is a like a stain that persists on a sheet no matter how hard we try to wipe it clean. Many of us absorb sex-shaming messages as we grow up: from parents, school, media, religious institution, and so on. It shapes not only our behaviors, but also our sexual identities, and takes its toll on our emotional lives. Biologically speaking, COVID-19 is a completely different virus compared to HIV or other STIs, with different transmission routes, requiring different responses. However, in their core, our health beliefs and behaviours are similar. The ambivalence between the need for intimacy with others and fear of the other remain a central dialectic in our understanding of health and infectious disease.

3. The ways humans respond to risk include: 1- denial and minimizing, also known as, "it happens to others but not to me"; 2- blaming, "these people are going to get us all sick"; 3- panicking, "we are all going to die."

4. At some point, a friend texted to ask me to call an ambulance because they could hardly breathe. When I tried to ask questions, they told me they were sure it was COVID-19. An hour later they wrote saying it was a panic attack. Thanks to the clients I work with, I learned about health anxiety, an excessive worry about having a serious medical condition. In some cases, a person misinterprets bodily sensations or minor changes as a particular disease's symptoms. In worse cases, people may somatize their fears into actual health complaints.

5. Fear exists for a reason. It keeps us alive. But the cost of fear is inflicted upon others as well. We develop criteria to profile who we come in (intimate) contact with, according to who we think is healthy. Fear is structured in alignment with our biases. In the counseling sessions, I heard all kinds of arguments for why contact with a certain person was particularly risky:
   "He works as a DJ"
   "She is a sex worker so I don't trust her"
   "They are HIV positive; I don't know what else they could be doing"
   "He comes from 'Africa;' it is highly likely he has HIV"

6. Such attitudes are consistent with the anthropologist Mary Douglas' observations (1966) that suggest that we associate harm such as sickness with behaviours that transgress social norms, or what is seen as impure, which according to her, means something that exists "where it does not belong."

7. In epidemics (and non-epidemics), we think in binaries. We speak of vulnerable vs. non-vulnerable, safe sex vs. unsafe sex, victims vs. perpetrators, responsible vs. irresponsible. These binaries are simplistic and misleading. During COVID-19, vulnerability was largely understood in terms of (elderly) age and preexisting health conditions, sidelining other vulnerabilities such as health insurance status or migration status. Not to mention those who do not have the luxury of "staying at home," those in refugee camps and detention centers. We are always as strong as our weakest link.

8. In the HIV epidemic, instead of being seen as a vulnerable group, gay men, sex workers and drug users were blamed for getting sick and spreading the virus. This reversal of roles and victim-blaming is a response signaling (internalized) homophobia and fear of sex and drugs. In contrast, art historian Douglas Crimp (1987) condemns a sort of bourgeois writing that espouses rhetorical incomprehension of intimacy-seeking behaviour. Crimp gives space for empathy, ambivalence, and uncertainty in responding to a pandemic, in the face of shame-and-blame health campaigns. He further proposes promiscuity as a way to survive an epidemic. "We are able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but also the great multiplicity of those pleasures," explains Crimp.

9. How do we think of a rave during a global pandemic? In this light, a rave can be seen simultaneously as risk, but also a way for survival, even resistance.

10. Fear is the enemy. Fear eats our souls. Facing fear is not about dismissing it. It is about recognizing it, embracing it, befriending it, and trusting ourselves. Abstract as it may sound, we need to accept that pain, changes, disease, death are part of the human experience. I have my pandemic fears. I am afraid of not being able to be there for those I love because of borders that I can't cross. I am afraid of facing racism when I get sick. However, I draw power from all the things I have survived in my life. From knowing that the world has ended for me before, and yet, I am still here.

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