

Preface

The idea for this volume took shape in Barcelona during the historic lockdown in spring 2020. I was on research leave and had just finished writing a book on critical theory and social transformation only to contemplate the onset of what is perhaps the most significant social transformation since the fall of communism. At the time, it was impossible to imagine anything like the severe lockdown that the Spanish state imposed, ostensibly to slow down the contagion in order to ease pressure on the health system. The suddenness of the suspension of liberties and normal life was as much a shock as the arrival of the pandemic itself. Initially, unsurprisingly, critical responses to the pandemic focused on the reactions of governments, which mostly acted too late and resorted to what were in many cases unprecedented lockdowns that led in turn to significant social and economic upheaval.

However, some months later it became apparent that a fuller analysis would need to address the reality of the pandemic itself beyond the restrictions to individual liberty and the failure of governance. And so the idea for a collaborative book emerged: in the need for a more comprehensive sociological assessment of the current situation and the prospects for the future. This volume is an early contribution to this goal.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is a complex phenomenon, both epidemiologically and sociologically. It is, on one level, an illness that has truly global reach despite major regional differences in terms of its impact. So, as far as western societies are concerned, the health emergency marks a break with the historical experience of the past hundred years or so since the elimination of cholera. This was a time when the most deadly infectious diseases were concentrated in Europe's former colonies. However, the separation of metropole and colony has broken down with the pandemic. On another level, in terms of historical experience, the Covid-19 pandemic is not so exceptional in the history of infectious diseases. Indeed, the post-1945 period that saw the final eradication of smallpox and polio in western societies was exceptional. What we are now witnessing, at least since the late 1990s, is the spread of new infectious diseases, which, unlike smallpox and polio, are zoonotic diseases, i. e. they derive from viral infections in other animals. We can expect more.

Covid-19 is therefore a wake-up call for greater preparation, but it also calls for greater public understanding and debate on how democratic societies should respond to such pandemics, what kind of knowledge is required, and how they may be prevented. It is also particularly significant that the pandemic is occurring at a time of major societal crisis on many levels: the ecological crisis, the crisis of

capitalism, and the crisis in democracy have all become entangled in the health crisis. The pandemic has intensified the sense of precariousness and anxiety that contemporary society engenders. It has exacerbated inequalities, xenophobia and racism. However, the current situation is ambivalent. On one side, there is a sense of catastrophe or regression, while on the other, there is the prospect of a transition to new times, or possibly we may just be in a state of perpetual transition to an unknown destiny. Perhaps the significance of the pandemic ultimately resides in the chances of a new model of society emerging from the debris of the present. But it is also possible that the pandemic simply entrenches changes that have already occurred. The chapters in this volume explore the ramifications of these problems and the sense of a historical moment of rupture.

In editing this volume, I have incurred many debts. I am especially grateful to the authors who enthusiastically responded to my invitation and contributed chapters at very short notice during what was for everyone a very unusual summer. It has been a pleasure to have worked with such an exceptional team. My thanks also go to the publisher at De Gruyter, Gerhard Boomgaarden, for instigating this volume and to Michaela Göbels for her assistance with its production. An anonymous reviewer of the proposal made some excellent suggestions to improve the original conception of the book. I am also grateful to Gordon Connell for his excellent copyediting of some of the chapters and to Neal Harris who provided additional assistance with the completion of the volume. I am grateful to my wife, Aurea Mota de Araujo, for suggesting the cover design, the painting by the Austrian expressionist artist Egon Schiele ‘The Family’ (1918). The painting depicts the artist, his wife and their unborn child shortly before their death in October 1918 of the devastating flu pandemic of that year. It appears to show resignation in the face of the inevitable, but also calm and perhaps even hope in the face of catastrophe. I am grateful to the Belvedere Gallery, Vienna for permission to use a photograph of the painting.

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