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## Viral Mimesis: The Patho(-) Logies of the Coronavirus

*This chapter argues that the human, all too human vulnerability to mimesis (imitation) is a central and so far underdiagnosed element internal to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Supplementing medical accounts of viral contagion, the chapter develops a genealogy of the concept of mimesis – from antiquity to modernity to the present – that is attentive to both its pathological and therapeutic properties. If an awareness of the pathological side of mimetic contagion is constitutive of the origins of philosophy, in Plato’s Republic, and crowd psychology called attention to the mirroring dynamic of affective contagion among crowds and publics in the modern period, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis highlights the pathological implications of hypermimetic conspiracies reloaded by new media, while also revealing the human ability to develop therapeutic patho-logies – that is, critical discourses (or logoi), on the contagious dynamic of mimetic pathos. Like a Janus-faced mirror, then, this genealogy of homo mimeticus calls attention to both the contemporary dangers of affective contagion and to the urgency of transformations or metamorphosis to counter future pandemic and environmental threats that loom large in the Anthropocene.*

The coronavirus, like all viruses, is mimetic in the biological sense that it reproduces itself through other living beings, but what is the link between the ancient concept of *mimēsis* and viral contagion? And if a link there is, how can an apparently unoriginal concept often translated as “imitation,” or “representation,” help us reflect on contagious pathologies that continue to cast a shadow on a globalized, interconnected, and precarious world? Now that increasing responsibility is placed on individuals to get vaccinated for those privileged to live in countries where the vaccine is available it is vital find a difficult – for some impossible – middle path between the social *distancing* necessary to avoid contamination on the one hand, and the return to essential social activities that require physical *proximity*, on the other. It is equally urgent to remember that it is not only the virus that is mimetic. Humans’ imitative tendencies are imbued with contagious properties as well – for both good and ill.

While the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has generated a viral contagion that is under the lens of epidemiologists and virologists who developed a vaccine with impressive speed, it has also made clear that epidemics are “total social facts” (Mauss 1966) that infect and affect the totality of human life and call for transdisciplinary reflections that concern the humanities as well. In particular, the coronavirus pandemic has made globally visible what philosophers from Plato and Aristotle onward have considered to be one of humans’ defining characteristics, for which

there is no vaccine: namely, that *Homo sapiens* is an extremely mimetic species, not only in the aesthetic sense that humans represent the world via realistic media like painting, theater, novels, and now cinema, TV, and a proliferation of new media – though we obviously do that as well. Humans are a mimetic species also in the psychological, sociological, anthropological, and political sense that we imitate, often unconsciously, other people, including gestures, emotions, habits, beliefs, and social practices – both good and bad. As Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer have convincingly shown in *Mimesis: Culture – Art – Society*, “the relevance of mimesis is not restricted to the aesthetic [...] its effects press outward into the social world, taking root, as Plato saw it, in individual behavior like a contagion” (Gebauer/Wulf 1995, 309). In the wake of the discovery of mirror neurons, the rise of a network society and the growing threat of a plurality of contagious pathologies – from (new) fascist movements to nuclear wars, global pandemics to rapid climate change – the timeliness of this diagnostic is more readily perceptible now than it was in the 1990s. Furthering an emerging mimetic turn, or re-turn of mimesis in critical theory on the shoulders of a genealogy of transdisciplinary theorists that, via Nietzsche, goes back to Plato, I argued that this contagion is constitutive of what I called, for lack of a more original term, “*homo mimeticus*.”<sup>1</sup>

According to this genealogical tradition critics and theorists are encouraged to rethink the mimetic properties of humans in an age that is, once again, shadowed by the threat of pandemics. If we do so, it becomes quickly apparent that mimesis shares some important characteristics with viruses: it is linked to reproduction; it transgresses the logic of representation to affect and infect human bodies in imperceptible ways; it renders humans vulnerable to a type of contagion that is amplified by proximity with others; it challenges the binary dividing human and nonhuman agents; and last but not least, it generates effects that go beyond clear-cut categories of good and evil and cannot be contained within unilateral diagnostic. For instance, on the one hand, the pandemic crisis generates affects like anxiety, fear, panic which – via new media – spread with unprecedented speed across and around the world; on the other hand, the pandemic also prompts new mimetic gestures, social distancing practices, ethical care for others, and positive, life-affirmative emotions like solidarity, compassion, and sympathy, which even from a physical distance – via the same media – make humans partake in the suffering (*pathos*) the pandemic has been generating, turning it into a partially shared suffering (*sympathos*, feeling with).

This structural ambivalence, or oscillation, is not deprived of therapeutic insights that provide a humanistic supplement to the medical sciences in periods of mimetic crisis: if the virus can, in the weakened form of a vaccine, provide a therapeutic immunity to epidemic contagion, mimesis is equally endowed with double pharmaceutical properties, in the ancient yet still contemporary Platonic sense of a *pharmakon* – both “poison” and “remedy” (Derrida 1981, 98). Or, to put it in our

1 *Homo Mimeticus* is an ERC-funded transdisciplinary project that advocates a mimetic turn, or return of mimesis in continental philosophy, critical theory, political theory, literary/film studies, among other perspectives. For outputs, see <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/publications/>.

diagnostic language, if the Covid-19 pandemic generates a multiplicity of contagious *pathologies* that affect *Homo sapiens* on a multiplicity of levels – biological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, political, economic etc. – it can also serve as a therapeutic and reflective mirror that provides the necessary distance to mobilize different discourses (or *logoi*) to account for the dynamic of mimetic affects or (*pathoi*) – what I call, “patho-*logies*” (Lawtoo 2013, 6-8) to emphasize the transdisciplinary discourses attentive to the contagious power of mimetic *pathos*.

At the risk of schematizing the diagnostic somewhat, at the affective level the coronavirus has tended to generate a double movement that oscillates, pendulum-like, between two opposed poles: on one side, a majority has been attracted toward an inevitable, fully legitimate given the scope and gravity of the crisis, but perhaps also excessively mediatized focus on the suffering or *pathos* that the pandemic is causing; on the other side, a minority of voices has manifested a critical and, more often, uncritical *distance* that underestimates the danger of the type of viral contagion we are up against. This polarity between emotional responses to Covid-19 (*pathos*) and critical suspicion of its danger (*distance*) was, of course, far from clear-cut and generated “patho(-)logical” effects (now in the double sense of affective pathologies and critical discourses) that are as infective as they are therapeutic and are still in need of evaluation.

A genealogy of mimesis that looks back to the past in order to cast light on the patho(-)logies of the present does not provide a unitary answer, or universal structure to address a constantly changing and evolving phenomenon. And yet, it foregrounds conceptual tools that find in mimetic *pathos* and the *distance* it generates new diagnostic principles that reach into the present. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche calls this paradoxical double movement between mimetic pathos and critical distance “*pathos of distance* [Pathos der Distanz]” (Nietzsche 1996, 12). A central concept in his genealogy of morals that unmasks faith in other worlds, Nietzsche continues to inform a genealogy of mimesis that urges us to remain faithful to this world. On his shoulders, I take three genealogical steps in this immanent direction to further a diagnostic of mimetic patho(-)logies in the age of Covid-19: two steps back, to reevaluate the relation between mimesis and the pathos of contagion for the ancients and for the moderns, and one ahead toward pathologies that are yet to come.

### **Ancient Origins: Old Caves, New Caves**

First step. Let us thus recall that when the concept of *mimēsis* first appears on the philosophical scene in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, Plato does not introduce an ontological concept that reduces the phenomenal world to a copy, shadow, or “phantom [*phantasma*]” of transcendental ideas or forms, turning artistic representations into phantoms of phantoms “at three removes from nature” (Plato 1963a, 597c). We will have to wait Book 10 of the *Republic* for this famous metaphysical critique of mimesis qua ontological mirror that continues to cast a shadow on con-

temporary understandings of mimesis restricted to aesthetic representation. Instead, in the *Republic* mimesis is first introduced as a theatrical, dramatic concept in line with its etymological origins – from *mimos*, “mime” or “actor” as well as “performance” (Else 1958, Gebauer/Wulf 1995, 27-30) – mimetic impersonations that concern first and foremost the education (*paideia*) of youth in the Greek city (*polis*) in a period still partially dominated by an oral culture. As Eric Havelock explains, Plato’s critique of mimesis must be understood in the context of what he calls an “oral state of mind” in which the actor who speaks in mimetic (first person) rather diegetic (third person) speech has “the power to make his audience identify almost pathologically and certainly sympathetically with the content of what he is saying” (Havelock 1963, 41, 45). Both at the level of form (*lexis*) and content (*logos*) of mimetic spectacles, dramatic impersonations of the *Iliad*, the *Theogony*, or the tragedies, says in substance Plato, under the mask of Socrates, have a pathological effect on the public because they generate a contagious *pathos* that is transmitted from the poet to the actors to the crowd of spectators in the theater, generating what Plato also calls in *Ion* a “chain [...] of iron rings” (Plato 1963b, 533e) endowed with magnetic, contagious, and in this sense, mimetic properties.

Reframed within this theatrical context, the famous Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of *Republic* is brought closer to home in a period of prolonged lockdown, seclusion and intensified mediatized exposure to mimetic representations projected in our private and increasingly digitalized caves. In the Platonic myth, the chained prisoners are spellbound by a shadow-play they mistake for reality because they lack the critical distance of the philosopher who, with the help of a guide, can take a rational step back from the sphere of sensible perception, break the spell of the magnetic chain, and start the steep ascending path of dialectical thought that leads to the real source of light outside the cave, and to the unconcealment of truth via the contemplation of the intelligible and transcendental forms or ideas characteristic of the *vita contemplativa* – as a metaphysical tradition from Plato to Heidegger suggests. And yet, the myth can also be read from an alternative perspective of human mimetic life more attentive to the dynamic of affective contagion within the cave, or *vita mimetica*. In fact, considered from an immanent, material and embodied condition, the allegory suggests that the prisoners remain chained to those projections because the spectacle of moving shadows which, due to an echo in the cave, appear themselves to speak. They are animated, so to speak. And this animation generates a mimetic *pathos* that – to echo *Ion*’s trope – is magnetic, contagious and has the immanent power to cast a spell on prisoners, literally chaining them to that theatrical spectacle. As Nietzsche will make clear at the twilight of metaphysics, writing with and contra Plato, there is a contagious (Dionysian) mimesis that is not confined within the wall of visual (Apollonian) representation but transgresses the boundaries between self and other, generating a mimetic *pathos* or intoxication (*Rausch*) that can have pathological effects on spectators, depriving them not only of true representations of reality but also of their rational control over their ego (see Lawtoo 2013, 27-84).

If we now further this genealogy of mimesis from a more contemporary perspective, this mimetic tradition still helps us to reflect critically on contemporary media that, perhaps more than ever, cast a magnetic spell on the human imagination. As film critics routinely note, the Allegory of the Cave anticipates the mimetic powers of cinema to induce what Edgar Morin calls an “imitation-hypnotic state” in spectators who are emotionally tied to cinematic images via mechanisms of “projection and identification” (Morin 2005, 96, 91), a mimetic tendency amplified by both the visual medium (or *lexis*) and the affective message (or *logos*) of cinematic projections. While cinema reproduces the Platonic scenario of the cave in the twentieth century, the mimetic-hypnotic effect of moving shadows also continues to operate on a variety of smaller screens, which, from TV to computers to smartphones, equally intensify the power of Apollonian images to cast a Dionysian spell that generates a psychic dispossession of the ego still constitutive of the twenty-first century. What was true for the Platonic prisoners remains thus true for contemporary spectators and users: mimetic media do not only represent what Plato calls “phantoms” far removed from reality; they also turn the ego into what Nietzsche already called a “phantom of the ego” (Nietzsche 1982, 61).

Thus reframed, we are in a better position to reevaluate the ongoing relevance of mimesis for a digital age that does not provide a transparent access to a unitary reality but generates a multiplicity of simulations of reality instead. Plato’s allegory reaches in the present as it foreshadows a world of simulation which postmodern critics were quick to disconnect from the problematic of mimesis. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, diagnosed a hyperreal world of simulacra and simulation that no longer rest on “imitation” but “liquidates all referents” insofar as the hyperreal “substitutes the real with signs of the real” (Baudrillard 1981, 11). Influential at the twilight of the last century, this postmodern diagnostic is of loose Nietzschean inspiration. Still, it does not account for the real, all too real effects generated by a hyperreal world, which, while no longer resting on the logic of mimesis as representations, continues to cast a material shadow on the phantom ego of *homo mimeticus* in the twenty-first century. The inversion of perspective from mimetic phantoms to mimetic egos, images to bodies, that informs Nietzsche’s critique of Platonism is now redoubled by our critique of postmodernism. In light of the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s, the neurosciences provide an empirical confirmation that visual representations, no matter how far removed or disconnected from reality, have indeed the mimetic power to generate contagious reflexes; images seen from a visual distance can trigger neurological discharges that generate pathos, via an immediate form of mimetic communication that is not necessarily mediated by consciousness but generates “embodied simulations” (Gallese 2005), nonetheless. In light of humans’ confirmed receptivity to mirroring reflexes caused by a perception of movements (real or represented, true or fake) it is thus urgent to provide a mimetic supplement to postmodern diagnostics of hyperreality prominent at the twilight of the last century that no longer account for the catastrophic realities of the present century. In fact, hyperreal simulations disconnected from the logic of mimetic representation have the power to retroact on *homo mimeticus* via spiraling

feedback loops that blur the line between truth and lies, origins and copies, facts and alternative facts, digital simulations and embodied imitations, generating shadows that are far removed from reality, indeed; and yet, these shadows induce deeply-felt fake beliefs (pandemic denial, mask refusal, vaccine skepticism etc.) and trigger real pathological actions that, in the context of a crisis, have the material power to amplify catastrophic consequences in real life. I call this looping effect whereby hyperreal simulations retroact on mimetic reflexes, “hypermimesis” in order to stress that the hyperreal may no longer be subordinated to the logic of representation but continues to be rooted in the all too real laws of imitation.

Now, it is true that as a significant section of the world population was holed up in private caves during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020-21 in what was the first world pandemic to be immediately shadowed by digital media, practices of social distancing at least in privileged Western countries were in a position to at least partially protect *Homo sapiens* from the epidemic contagion and the viral pathology it entails. And yet, it is equally true that *homo mimeticus* was far from immune from affective contagion and the mimetic pathologies it entails. On the contrary, chained to the continuous flow of true and fake daily news on a plurality of (social) media that amplified the pathos generated by the increasing number of victims, a contradictory double movement familiar to genealogists of mimesis began to take shape. The Covid-19 pandemic generates a hybrid viral/virtual phenomenon that triggered the following questions among influential figures in the humanities: is the obsessive media focus on the spread of the virus making humans lose the sense, not of the reality of the pandemic itself (that is real, not a shadow, people are still dying, and in massive numbers – one million as I wrote the essay in the fall of 2020 [over 4 millions, as I revise the piece in August 2021]) but, rather of the *proportions* between the mass-mediatised phenomenon and the state of exception it generated on the one hand, and the actual danger of the mortality rate caused by the pandemic on the other – as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben controversially claimed when, at the outset of the pandemic, he compared Covid-19 to a “normal flu” and condemned the Italian government’s “disproportionate response” (Agamben 2020)? Or is Covid-19 a symptom that humanity has reached a tipping point and that we are now facing an epochal transformation that is likely to generate even more catastrophes – as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes with pathos in *Pandemic!* when he claims that the virus will “destroy the foundations of our lives” (Žižek 2020)? Or should we rather forge a middle path between pathos and distance, as genealogical lenses indicate?

The coronavirus generates a contagious pathology under the lens of virologists and epidemiologists to be countered by social distance and the creation of vaccines that are now being distributed, although unequally, across the globe. At the same time, it also triggers contagious affects in the digital age that, via the proliferation of conspiracy theories can lead to vaccine hesitancy and pandemic denials that critical theorists should analyze from a patho-*logical* distance to promote cultural therapies. Viral contagion affects and infects individuals alike generating a contagious sameness that takes precedence over individual differences; and yet, it also gives

new theorists of mimesis an occasion to reframe the complex interplay between viral sameness and cultural differences. In the last century, mimetic theorists like René Girard, for instance, noted that the plague generates what he calls “crisis of difference,” that is, “a process of undifferentiation” that erases individual, but also social and cultural distinctions by introducing a collective sameness Girard considered characteristic of “the eternal ethos of the plague” (Girard 1978, 136, 137). All humans can indeed be infected by viruses, and in this general sense we may not be as different as we like to think. But the crisis Girard has in mind is not first and foremost an epidemic crisis. On the contrary, writing from the privileged position of a dominant Western country (USA) in a period of prosperity and relative stability (post-World War II) that preceded the advent of devastating viral plagues (HIV), Girard could still claim in the 1970s that “we live in a world where the plague and epidemics in general have disappeared almost altogether” (1978, 138). For Girard’s mimetic theory, the real threat to humanity does not stem from contagious viruses but from the contagious dimension of human violence instead. Thus, subordinating the former to the latter, he considers representations of the plague in literature as “a transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence that spreads, literally like the plague” (1978, 139). Thus understood, the plague in mythic and literary texts becomes “metaphorical” of the contagious logic of mimetic desire, rivalry, violence and the affective undifferentiation the latter generates, a transhistorical, universal and eternal logic which is the bedrock of Girard’s mimetic theory.

Violence is, indeed, contagious, especially in periods of crisis, including pandemic crises; and precisely for this reason it is crucial to account for the interplay between two different, entangled, and quite literal threats. For mimetic theorists concerned with the real danger of epidemics, Covid-19 gives us an occasion to re-think mimesis and theorize contagion again by developing alternative *patho-logies* to account for the interplay between viral infection and social pathos. Rather than a hermeneutic that uncovers a mimetic sameness hidden behind an epidemic plague treated metaphorically, genealogical lenses propose a diagnostic of the multiplicity of differences that emerge from the patho(-)logical interplay of social contagion and viral contagion treated quite literally.

Taking distance from egocentric principles that generated discontent among many privileged Western subjects during the lockdown as desires were restricted to private or virtual spaces, the coronavirus offers an occasion to reflect self-critically on privileges that are too often taken for granted in the West and are not the same for all. Pandemic crises may generate sameness and undifferentiation in the sphere of abstract theory, but above all, it reveals the importance of social, economic, and political differences entailing concrete differentiations in terms of race, gender, and age, central in inflecting vulnerability to the virus in practice. As Edgar Morin was quick to notice, using a mimetic trope to reflect on human, all too human differences: “the [Covid-19] lockdown has been a magnifying mirror of social inequalities” (Morin 2020, 39). Countries in the global south are in fact simultaneously fighting against other epidemics and mortal sicknesses (HIV, Ebola, famine, environmental catastrophes, etc.) that are not in the limelight of daily news, yet contin-

ue to affect what Frantz Fanon called the “wretched of the earth” who are the most vulnerable to the epidemic: from racial minorities in the US to the migrant camps in Europe, from the slums of Bangladesh and India to the immigrant workers across the world to earthquake survivors in Haiti, we should not let the still whitish maps of the Covid-19 spread at the center of Africa veil the reality that these areas are most exposed to what Joseph Conrad, in his most influential narrative, *Heart of Darkness*, called “the horror.” Interestingly, in one of his lesser-known narratives of the sea titled *The Shadow-Line* Conrad had already dramatized the effects of an epidemic outbreak on board ship. He did it so vividly that it led to the following diagnostic in 2016: “the shadow of epidemics looms large on the horizon [...] Hence the urgency to turn back to a writer like Conrad who, well before contemporary theorists, puts readers back in touch with the literal effects of pathological contagion” (Lawtoo 2016, 92). Hence again, we should now add, the need to strive for a global vision rather than a nationalistic vision; to take in information in homeopathic dosages from official news, rather than in massive doses from social media; to trust science rather than conspiracy theories; to recognize the privilege of the many who can take distance in privileged countries, and the tragedy of proximity so many face in the global south – at least if we want mimesis to start operating not only as a pathology but as a patho-*logy* as well.

### **Modern Contagion: Crowd Patho(-) Logies**

Second step. The connection between mimesis and affective contagion became central to sociological reflections in the last decades of nineteenth century. It emerged among theories of crowd behavior that were neglected in the twentieth century, yet deserve to be revisited in the context of pandemic crises in the twenty-first century. Founding figures of crowd psychology like Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde in France noted that when people are assembled in a physical crowd or, at one remove, become part of a virtual public – while reading newspapers or, now, Twitter or Facebook posts – they transmit emotions from self to others in an irrational, unconscious, and as they both say, “contagious” way. As Le Bon puts it in *The Crowd*: “In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest” (2002, 7). And Gabriel Tarde expands the diagnostic of contagion from the crowd to the social bond *tout court* by considering society in general as held together by flows of imitation. Thus, he rhetorically asks in *The Laws of Imitation*: “And this similitude [in opinions and emotions] is it not due to a flow of imitation which can be accounted for by needs and ideas disseminated by previous imitative contagions [*contagions imitatives*]?” (2001, 50).

There are, thus, largely unnoticed similarities between mimetic theory and crowd psychology that deserve to be revisited in an age haunted by the double specter of affective and viral contagion. Like Girard after them, both Tarde and Le Bon use the term “contagion” metaphorically to indicate an invisible transmission



of emotions that spreads from self to others as a contagious sickness like the plague or the cholera would do; and yet, they do so on theoretical foundations that have hypnotic suggestion as a *via regia* to crowd behavior and pave the way for alternative theories of mimetic contagion that take seriously the literal danger of epidemic contamination. Notice also the inversion of perspectives: if Girard reads the plague in literature as a “metaphor” of mimetic contagion, crowd psychologists treat the reality of viral or medical contagion as a metaphor to account for the dynamic of affective or mimetic contagion. This inversion is theoretically significant. The metaphor of affective contagion in the tradition of crowd psychology, in fact, does *not* dispute the real danger of viral contagion. On the contrary, it draws on the language of medical contagion to account for the disconcerting capacity of emotions to spread rhizomatically, from self to others.

The medical language crowd theorists convoke to diagnose the dynamic of social affects is genealogically linked to the problematic of epidemic contagion that concerns us. Writing in fin-de-siècle France, both Le Bon and Tarde borrowed the concept of “contagion” directly from Louis Pasteur’s then relatively new discovery of microbes to account for diseases like cholera and rabies. Confronted with the emergent phenomenon of crowds, which as Christian Borch has recently shown, finds in the modern city “the place in and from which imitations spread contagiously” (2019, 21), crowd theorists applied it to the collective psyche in order to account for the unconscious relation, or rapport, between self and other, a mirroring relation that leads the ego to mimetically reproduce the affects of others – a tendency, which as the present author and Gunter Gebauer have shown, is amplified by new media that generate “new masses” in which individuals are virtually connected in terms that can lead to both homogeneity (as in right-wing populism) as to heterogeneity (as in democratic pluralism) (Gebauer 2019, 311-313; Lawtoo 2019a, 32-51, 166-178).

What we must add is that the difference between crowd psychology and mimetic theory opens up an alternative theoretical foundation to account for mimetic pathologies, both affective and infective. It is in fact crucial to recall that, for Girard, the plague is metaphorical of a type of reciprocal and escalating violence that has its origins in the mimetic structure of desire and the rivalry that ensues from what is essentially a triangular structure. As Girard summarizes this dynamic: “violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means” (1978, 7). Violence is thus a contagious social dynamic. Granted. But, for Girard, its origins stem from mimetic desires that finds in a familial (Freudian) triangulation of desire and identification its genealogy (Lawtoo 2019a, 19-31). The pre-Freudian unconscious emerging from crowd psychology suggests, on the other hand, that a dyadic/rhizomatic, rather than triangular/familial structure, is at the origins of a type of affective contagion that does not simply (metaphorically) resemble the plague but spreads (structurally) like a viral infection. That is, by moving from self to other(s) via an expanding network of relations. Thus, a subject driven by a mimetic pathos (fear, anxiety, resentment, aggression, conspiratorial beliefs, etc.) has the power

to contaminate one or more subjects with the same pathos, which can expand rhizomatically and exponentially in order to affect/infect a mass or public in the body politic crowd.

Virologists tell us how the virus infects the body, but how does this affective contagion penetrate the psyche? Via a mimetic principle that belongs to a tradition of the unconscious that was neglected in the past century, yet genealogical lenses are bringing back to the fore in the present century. Both Le Bon and Tarde, in fact, like Nietzsche and Bernheim before them, relied on the model of hypnosis or hypnotic suggestion in order to account for the contagious dynamic of emotions. For Le Bon, contagion and suggestion are two sides of the same mimetic phenomenon: “When defining crowds, we said that one of their general characteristics was an excessive suggestibility, and we have shown to what an extent suggestions are contagious in every human agglomeration; a fact which explains the rapid turning of the sentiments of a crowd in a definite direction” (2002, 14). It is because subjects who are part of a crowd are in psychic state of a light hypnosis that they are prone to mirror the emotions of others, spreading them contagiously from self to other. Gabriel Tarde confirms this point as he zooms in on the mirroring neuronal principles that account for this contagious process as he writes: “the action at a distance from brain to brain that I call imitation, is assimilable to hypnotic suggestion [*suggestion hypnotique*]” (2001, 257 n1). Tarde also accounts for this mirroring/ contagious mechanism via theories of hypnotic suggestion that assume (rightly, we now know) that in humans “nerves imitate nerves, brains imitate brains” (2001, 264). It is now well known that this mirroring principle rests on motor neurons called “mirror neurons,” which were discovered by neuroscientists in the 1990s; less known is that this mirroring principle was already advocated in the 1890s. For a Nietzschean psychological tradition, in fact, reflex imitation, much more than dreams, served thus as a *via regia* to a relational, social, and immanent unconscious. Given its receptivity to emotional contagion, I call it, the “mimetic unconscious” (Lawtoo 2019b, 38).

Now, a genealogy of the mimetic unconscious attentive to psycho-somatic reflexes, intersubjective bonds, altered states of consciousness, and contagious emotional dynamics provides a patho-logical supplement to account for the interplay between viral contagion and affective contagion. In particular, it shows how irrational pathos in periods of crisis can easily take the lead over logical distance, generating forms of contagion with massive pathological political consequences. Le Bon in particular explicitly tied his crowd psychology to politics as he spoke of “prestigious” leaders who have the power to cast a spell of the crowd. As Le Bon puts it in *The Crowd*: When a leader “is proposed to imbue the mind of a crowd with ideas and beliefs [...] the leaders have recourse to different expedients. The principal of them are three in number and clearly defined – affirmation, repetition, and contagion” (2002, 77). Historical examples of political leaders who relied on such rhetorical strategies to inject political pathologies into the body politic do not lack and their shadows reach into the present. Leaders like Mussolini and Hitler, in fact, drew directly from Le Bon’s theory of social contagion, treating his book as a

manual to galvanize the masses: repetition of slogans, authoritative affirmations, use of images, gestures and facial expressions rather than logical thoughts, all these rhetorical strategies had a disconcerting efficacy in the past century. We saw they continue to be effective in the present century. The powers of mimesis reloaded via new media are, in fact, contributing to spreading, if not fascism itself, at least the shadow of fascism, or “(new) fascism” (Lawtoo 2019a), which, among other political and social pathologies, also undermines efforts to contain viral contagion.

Time and again during the pandemic crisis, leaders like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, and Donald Trump in the U.S., among others, amplified the pathological effects of the virus via socio-political pathologies that did not erase differences. On the contrary, they amplified, often via the use of violence, differences with dramatic consequences for socially underprivileged subjects in terms of racial, gender, national and class differences: denying the danger of viral infection, prescribing false antidotes, not wearing masks, holding rallies without masks, discrediting medical experts, promoting lies, calling for violent military interventions against peaceful protests, etc., are all manifestations of ways in which a viral infection can indeed be amplified and co-opted by (new) fascist forms of will to power we should not hasten to call “populist” for they are obviously opposed to the well-being of the “people.”

And yet, the dynamic interplay between viral contagion and affective contagion in an age haunted by the shadow of (new) fascist leaders has not only amplified the viral pathology; it also generates a mimetic pathos that can be put to *patho-logical* use. The pathos, or suffering, generated by systemic police racism and systemic racial oppression is a case in point. Reaching a tipping point with the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, which was caught on camera and went viral on social media, it revealed the structural racism already responsible for centuries of systemic oppression in the U.S., which the pandemic crisis contributed to rendering visible.<sup>2</sup> Rather than functioning as a scapegoat with unifying social functions among the perpetrators, this murder ignited anti-racist protests that spread contagiously, within the U.S. and beyond, turning a personal pathos into a sym-pathos shared by African Americans, other black and non-black populations, stretching to affect a significant segment of the world population.

In a paradoxical looping effect constitutive of mimetic patho(-)logies, the dynamic of this anti-racist and democratic affective contagion cannot be dissociated from both (new) fascist and viral contagion. In fact, it illustrates the paradoxical power of mimetic pathos to turn social pathologies like racism and (new) fascism into *patho-logies contra* racism via movements like Black Lives Matter driven by democratic contagion. While the months of lockdown played a key, somewhat paradoxical, and underdiscussed role in amplifying and disseminating the anti-racist protests across the world hypermimetically, the anti-racist sympathy was not less real. On the contrary, it exposed the violence internal to the systemic racism that

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<sup>2</sup> The list of black lives murdered by the police is long and includes Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake among many other recent victims. See <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html>.

never stopped to plague the U.S. especially, but not only, in order to affirm the basic principle that “black lives matter.” In a paradoxical looping effect, in which a viral/political pathology fuels a contrary democratic and patho-*logical* movement, the viral contagion and the social distance it imposed also showed the potential of global crises to amplify a life-affirmative pathos that leads to movements of racial sympathy and solidarity across the world – hypermimetic counter-movements that should join in order to face the most dangerous effects of what is ultimately a human, all too human virus.

### **The Human Virus: Metamorphosis in the Anthropocene**

Two genealogical steps back allow us to make a last step – or maybe jump – ahead. Let us zoom out and situate both digital shadows and (new) fascist phantoms against the material background of Planet Earth that, for the moment, still sustain us. With some distance, we can realize that we entered into a new geological epoch that should not simply serve as a nonhuman background but as the vital environment in which to develop *pharmaka* or patho-*logies* that should not simply be anthropocentric (the Covid-19 pandemic reveals that, to different degrees, we inevitably all are), but are attentive to the conditions of both human and nonhuman survival in what is now known as the age of the “Anthropocene” (Crutzen/Stoermer 2000; see also Bonneuil/Fressoz 2016; Connolly 2017; Wulf 2020). If the term sounds too anthropocentric, we can call it Capitalocene, Necrocene, or Chthulucene; the names change, but the material reality remains the same. Not unlike an epidemic infection, climate change is imperceptible, operates on a global level, calls attention to the agentic powers of nonhuman forces, is (re)produced and amplified by humans, infects all aspects of life, operates on a planetary scale, and above all, calls for an urgent change of habits and modes of lives.

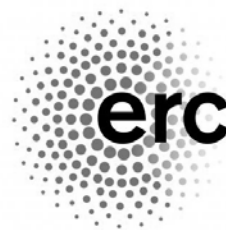
If the Covid-19 pandemic crisis reminded *Homo sapiens* of anything, it is that the ability to change is constitutive of human mimetic abilities, or *homo mimeticus*. For our genealogical purpose, this last step provides the necessary critical distance to overturn our critique of a mimetic virus in order to propose an attempt at self-critique. If we look into the genealogical mirror the Covid-19 pandemic sets up, a familiar figure appears: the double-faced *pharmakon* that is both responsible for the spread of mimetic pathologies and has the potential to develop mimetic pathologies is no one other than *Homo sapiens qua homo mimeticus*. It is thus up to all of us to take the pandemic as what Bruno Latour called a “dress rehearsal” (2020) to start turning the all too human mimetic pathologies into mimetic patho-*logies* that affirm survival for both human and nonhuman life on Earth. In a strange mirroring reflex, the pandemic crisis can perhaps serve as a model, or *exemplum*. Among the catastrophic contagious pathologies that plague us in the Anthropocene, it also reveals the extraordinary capacity of humans to adapt, chameleon-like, to changing conditions and promote alternative habits, modes of lives, and social practices that call for a metamorphosis of the species *Homo sapiens qua mimeticus*. As lockdown

restrictions begin to be eased, it is imperative to resist the mimetic reflex to return to business as usual – or worse, intensify leisure activities that foster global movement, consumption, and rampant pollution to compensate for the time “lost.” The time that was lost for us, was gained for the Planet – but if it seemed long to us, it was but a short breath for the Earth.

The coronavirus will not be the last catastrophe to hit the Planet in the age of the Anthropocene. Bigger waves are hovering on the horizon, and we need to start preparing to be hit with unprecedented force: global warming, ocean rising, species extinctions, draughts, hurricanes, deforestation, and other catastrophes cannot be cured with a vaccine. They call for a human metamorphosis of behavior, and thus of consciousness. If we put periods spent in lockdown in our digital caves to *pathological* use, then, the Covid-19 pandemic reveals in practice what many knew in theory: we are not the autonomous, self-sufficient, and omnipotent monads neoliberal capitalism induces us to believe we are. On the contrary, we are relational creatures who are interdependent, extremely vulnerable, but also strikingly adaptable, plastic, and in this new sense mimetic, part of a network of actions and reactions that transgress the borders that divide self from others, but also nations and continents, human and nonhumans, all of which are part of an immanent, fragile, and interconnected ecological system out of which life grows. Since we have only this world, the Covid-19 epidemic makes us see that we do not really have a choice: it’s high time to exit the Platonic cave and heed the Nietzschean invitation to stay, or rather become, become true to the Earth.

Developing antidotes *contra* the pathologies of *homo mimeticus* and disseminate them via life-affirmative forms of mimetic contagion are the next steps to take.

**Acknowledgment:** *This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n°716181: Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism).*



**European Research Council**

Established by the European Commission

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