



<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Corona-Party at the Ruins of an Earthquake

Petar Jandrić, Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, Croatia; University of Wolverhampton, UK, [pjandric@tvz.hr](mailto:pjandric@tvz.hr)

---

Jandrić, Petar. 2020 “Corona-Party at the Ruins of an Earthquake.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (5): 34-39. <https://wp.me/P1Bfg0-4Wa>.

## **Now We're Waiting for Locusts**

On 13 March 2020 Croatian government introduced harsh lockdown measures against the rising pandemic of the coronavirus (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2020). While the whole population was confined to their homes, at 6:24 am on the Sunday morning of 22 March 2020, Croatia's capital Zagreb (population ca 1 million) was hit by a 5.5 Richter earthquake (BBC News 2020). Within seconds, my partner and I ran from our flat at the third floor of a 100-year old Austro-Hungarian building and found ourselves in the street. Barefoot and in our pyjamas, we found ourselves talking to neighbours known and unknown, while more than 30 aftershocks shook the city for the rest of the day. Less than five minutes after the first shock it began to snow, and we all chuckled at a bitter viral Facebook message saying: 'And now we're waiting for locusts'.

In the midst of unprecedented lockdown measures, Zagreb was hit by the strongest earthquake in 140 years—and its citizens were equally unprepared for both. To add insult to injury, recommended responses to these disasters are directly opposed—the virus is avoided by staying at home, while (consequences of) the earthquake are avoided by going out. Faced with the invisible threat of the virus and the visible threat of being buried alive, no-one has returned to their flats. Someone made a quick beer run to the nearby gas station, and we had a nice little corona-party at the ruins of our beloved city. Few days later, doctors and patients had another nice little corona-party in their emergency rooms... But who could blame terrified people for risking a possibility to contract the virus in the face of failing walls and ceilings?

## **How Many Deaths is 'Enough'?**

Most of us intuitively know that natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, are distributed throughout the world unequally. It is perhaps less intuitive, but hugely important, that disasters of similar magnitude can cause radically different consequences. For instance, the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila, rated 6.3 on the Richter magnitude scale, "killed 309 people, left 70,000 homeless and devastated around 56 villages in Italy's mountainous heart". Images of destruction and suffering have become viral, and decade later, Italy still has not completely recovered from the event (Giuffrida 2019). In contrast, the Osaka 2018 earthquake rated 6.1 Richter incurred 3 fatalities, 200 injuries, and no material damage to speak of, hardly causing a whisper in global mediascape (McCurry 2018). So what is the difference between these two earthquakes? Living within a volcanic zone on the Pacific Ring of Fire, Japanese people experience many earthquakes and have a century-old tradition of earthquake-resistant building. Residents of L'Aquila are not that used to deadly earthquakes, so they don't earthquake-proof their buildings.

While it is still too early to make any decisive conclusions about the coronavirus, its spread seems to exhibit similar patterns. According to Bloomberg's Justin Fox, "[t]he governments that seem to have been most ready for COVID-19 have something in common: a recent coronavirus scare". Fox elaborates:

[T]he Asian countries that had experienced SARS and MERS not only took pandemic scenarios seriously, but also seem to have had the right pandemic scenarios for this particular disease — ones that envisioned some possibility of halting rather than just slowing its spread. They could also count on much of the population remembering the previous outbreak, knowing what they were supposed to do and having stashes of surgical masks in their apartments (Fox 2020).

Despite these similarities, the coronavirus pandemic is very different from an earthquake. First, earthquakes are local; the pandemic is global. Second, science knows at least something about earthquakes; our understanding of the novel coronavirus is still very limited. Third, waking up in a shaking bed into a deafening roar of the earthquake is easily perceived as an immediate threat to one's life; viruses are invisible, so anti-viral measures require a lot of belief in science and provide fertile ground for all kinds of post-truth, fake news, and bullshit (Peters, Jandrić and McLaren 2020). These and other differences contribute to development of very different responses to earthquakes and viruses. A 5.5 Richter earthquake has catapulted population of Zagreb into collective trance; how many Richters would be needed to push citizens of Tokyo or Osaka into a corona-party?

The humankind does not have other choice but to defeat the coronavirus—at this stage, we can only hope that our victory won't be a Pyrrhic one. So how many people need to die of COVID-19 before the world decides to develop collective anti-viral measures analogous to Japanese earthquake-proof building standards? While it is commonplace to claim that every human life is equally important, comparison between earthquakes in L'Aquila and Osaka sends a different message: this perverse body count does exist. Earthquakes did not kill 'enough' Italians to make them earthquake-proof their buildings; earthquakes killed 'enough' Japanese to make earthquake-proofing a norm. Each community determines its own 'sufficiently large number of earthquake-related deaths' before it decides to introduce costly earthquake-proofing regulations, and this number depends on many factors such as proximity of earthquakes (frequency, magnitude, etc.), economy, cultural norms, and others. Translated to, for instance, an arbitrary number such as percentage of victims per capita within 100 years, 'enough' could mean various things to the Italians and the Japanese, to Catholics and Buddhists, to capitalists and communists, and so on.

A similar line of argument can be applied to the coronavirus—this time, with an important global twist. How many deaths are required before the likes of Donald Trump realize that there is no such thing as a 'Chinese' (or, for that matter, 'American' or 'Croatian') virus; before the pharmaceutical industry decides to invest in (pecuniary) non-profitable antiviral vaccines; before the world decides to take lessons from localized events (such as SARS and MERS) to develop protective measures from global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic? Will COVID-19 kill 'enough' people to make the world develop global measures against similar pandemics in the future?

### **Social Epistemology in the Time of COVID-19**

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic in human history. Compared to pandemics such as the Black Death, Spanish Flu, and others, the COVID-19 pandemic is reasonably 'mild'—both

because of relatively small incidence of death amongst the infected, and because of high-tech medical responses available in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Newman 2020). Pandemics which killed millions such as Black Death and Spanish Flu happened much before our lifetimes, so it could be argued that impersonal collective memory hidden in historical books and photographs has not provided strong enough motivation for development of measures that would protect the contemporary world against COVID-19 and similar threats. Yet the world continually experiences lesser and quite deadly epidemics: only between 2018 and 2019, we had the epidemic of the Nipah virus infection in India, the Ebola epidemic in Congo and Uganda, the measles epidemic in Congo and Samoa, and the dengue fever epidemic in Asia-Pacific and Latin America (Wikipedia 2020). In 2009-2010, we also experienced the global swine flu pandemic. The world has been warned—so why did we not take these warnings seriously enough? And, more importantly—are we ready to learn our lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answers to this theoretical question, which could bear very practical consequences for the future of our world, require approaches which cut across science, technology, and society. In relation to development of global responses to COVID-19, and similar pandemics in the future, Steve Fuller’s social epistemology offers three important inputs: its normative agenda (cf. Fuller 1988/2002), its globalist conception of science (Fuller and Jandrić 2019), and its ‘naturalistic approach to epistemology, aimed at discovering empirically how material constraints and organizational parameters influence the process of producing scientific results’ (Collin 2010: 167). Acknowledging that social epistemology (and Fuller’s work in particular) have much more to offer to the debate than these somewhat arbitrarily chosen points, I will now briefly examine their relevance for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much can be said about normative aspects of social epistemology, yet in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, the following line written by Steve Fuller in our recent interview is of particular relevance: “When I say ‘normative’ I simply mean a concern with how things ought to be done—‘performance standards’, if you will: What makes something better or worse at what it does, and what contributes to its improvement or decline.” (Fuller and Jandrić 2019: 192) Furthermore, says Fuller,

from the standpoint of the growth of knowledge as something we wish to promote (i.e. the normative question), it is more important to learn how a particular solution to a problem became the solution to the problem than how the particular solution itself was reached. After all, that ‘locked in’ solution may have inhibited the development of more efficient solutions, which in turn may have resulted in other benefits (Fuller and Jandrić 2019, 201).

In capitalism, this collective ‘we’ (referring to Fuller’s “something *we* wish to promote”) (my emphasis), is led by the marketplace. Thus, the question ‘How many people need to die of COVID-19 before the world changes the course of action?’ unfortunately yet smoothly translates into the question ‘How many people need to die before their deaths become financially unsustainable?’

Implementing lockdown measures against the coronavirus, the world is facing the “a moral and political dilemma” (Hu 2020) between market-centred normativity (act to minimize damage to the market) and human-centred normativity (act to minimize damage to human beings). While it could be argued that these two normativities converge at a certain meta-level (minimizing human damages seems intuitively linked to minimizing market damages), in practice their relationship is one of competition and struggle. For instance, looking at huge financial damages suffered by Chinese micro-, small-, and medium-size private enterprises (MSMEs) during the lockdown, Hu (2020) asks: “should potential risk-takers (MSMEs owners) be permitted to exercise their voluntary, risk-laden behavior (resumption of work during the pandemic), when side-effects of such behavior (becoming an infection source) will likely undermine the interest of risk-evaders (survive at a bare-minimum level for as long as necessary)?”

Speaking of various approaches to negotiating such dilemmas, social epistemology is clearly against standard universalist and transcendentalist conceptions of science and philosophy. At the same time, social epistemology retains “a place for a globalist conception of science in which the latter is assessed from the point of view of the interests of all of mankind, not only local constituencies” (Collin 2010, 167). But what is the interest of all of humankind? While it seems generally accepted that lockdown measures save lives in developed economies such as Europe and the US, developing countries are voicing concerns that economic slowdown caused by the lockdown may kill more people by hunger than the coronavirus:

“We haven’t eaten for two days,” Devi said, noting that the little money they had saved quickly ran out. “We are scared of this disease but I think hunger will kill us. We will stay hungry, but how can we watch our children starve?” (Rekha Devi, India) (Sanjai and Naqvi 2020).

“What is happening in Zimbabwe is very scary,” said Tinashe Moyo at the supermarket. “It’s like we are playing cards. It’s either you win coronavirus or you win starvation. I am very scared.” (Tinashe Moyo, Zimbabwe) (Associated Press 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic mixes ‘pure’ ethical questions (how many deaths is ‘enough?’) with postcolonial legacy of global geopolitical order (whose deaths count?). With its decidedly non-universalist approaches, social epistemology is well-equipped to deal with those difficult challenges.

Fuller’s third point, naturalistic approach to epistemology, returns this discussion to science and “simply means that I take historical and empirical research as setting *prima facie* constraints on the norms of organised inquiry” (Fuller and Jandrić 2019, 193) (emphasis original). The naturalistic approach is about improving the instrumental efficacy of science, not just in relation to what is (current state of the art of virus research) but also in relation to what might be (what kind of response to future pandemic might be developed if we take messages from the COVID-19 pandemic seriously to invest more, and invest differently, in virus research). The naturalistic approach feeds back to continuous reassessment of the normative goals of science, including but not limited to the question how many people need to die, and whose deaths count, before the world decides to act. In this way, normativity, global focus, and naturalistic approach to inquiry permanently circle between ethical

questions, policy responses, and scientific research, switching its focus from present to future and then back to present again, but always keeping the whole image in sight.

### **There is No Bad Pandemic, Only Bad Science**

Written one month after our little corona-party at the ruins of an earthquake, this article cannot avoid strong emotions and inevitable exaggerations that accompany these emotions. Only a psychopath would be emotionally unaffected by such events, and only a lousy philosopher would fail to admit their own emotional engagement. Within this rush of emotions, it is comforting to realize that familiar insights from social epistemology can provide conceptual tools for answering some pressing questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and providing guidelines for reacting to similar future events. Furthermore, as I argued elsewhere (Jandrić 2020), this heightened state of mind could provide a fruitful impetus for making a difference: by removing some of our usual rationality, it could help humankind move from entrenched paths of business as usual and consider some real change.

Outdoor lovers often say that there is no bad weather, only bad gear—and social epistemologists might add that there is no bad pandemic, only bad science. At the expense of many human lives, the COVID-19 pandemic will be defeated even with our lousy instrumentalist scientific gear. However terrible, this struggle offers valuable insights in many deficiencies of our present approaches to global contemporary challenges to our philosophies, sciences, and politics. With its naturalistic approach to organised inquiry, its global focus, its active understanding of normativity, and other features which did not find their way into this article, social epistemology offers a lot of guidance for improving these deficiencies. So let's use social epistemology to gear up for the current COVID-19 pandemic and develop philosophies, sciences, and politics more suited for global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **References**

- Associated Press. 2020. "In Zimbabwe, Starving People are Willing to Risk Coronavirus to Get Food, Water on the Table." <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-30/in-zimbabwe-you-win-coronavirus-or-you-win-starvation>. Accessed 28 April 2020.
- BBC News. 2020. "Earthquake Rocks Croatia's Capital Zagreb." <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51995861>. Accessed 28 April 2020.
- Collin, Finn. 2011. *Science Studies as Naturalized Philosophy*. Springer Science+Business Media.
- Fox, Justin. 2020. "What Prepares a Country for a Pandemic? An Epidemic Helps." *Bloomberg Opinion* 18 March. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-18/COVID-19-response-better-in-countries-with-sars-mers-coronavirus>. Accessed 28 April 2020.
- Fuller, Steve. 1988/2002. *Social Epistemology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Fuller, Steve and Petar Jandrić. 2019. "The Postdigital Human: Making the History of the Future." *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1 (1): 190–217.

- Giuffrida, Angela. 2019. "Ten Years After the Quake, Italy's Ravaged Heart is Still Struggling to Recover." *The Guardian* 7 April.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/07/george-clooney-laquila-italy-earthquake-restoration>. Accessed 28 April 2020.
- Government of the Republic of Croatia. 2020. "Coronavirus Protection Measures." <https://vlada.gov.hr/coronavirus-protection-measures/28950>. Accessed 28 April.
- Hu, Zhengdong. 2020. "China's Blacklist System under the COVID-19 Precautionary Lockdown Regime." *Postdigital Science and Education*. doi: 10.1007/s42438-020-00127-2.
- Jandrić, Petar. 2020. "Postdigital Research in the Time of COVID-19." *Postdigital Science and Education*. doi: 10.1007/s42438-020-00113-8.
- McCurry, Justin. 2018. "Osaka Earthquake: Three People Dead After 6.1-Magnitude Tremor." *The Guardian* 18 June.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/18/osaka-earthquake-japan-61-magnitude-tremor>. Accessed 28 April 2020.
- Newman, Tim. 2020. "Comparing COVID-19 with Previous Pandemics." *Medical News Today* 19 April. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/comparing-covid-19-with-previous-pandemics>. Accessed 28 April 2020.
- Peters, Michael A., Petar Jandrić, and Peter McLaren. 2020. "Viral Modernity? Epidemics, Infodemics, and the 'Bioinformational' Paradigm." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2020.1744226.
- Sanjai, P.R. and Muneeza Naqvi. 2020. "'We will Starve Here': Why Coronavirus has India's Poor Fleeing the Cities." *The Independent* 3 April.  
[https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long\\_reads/coronavirus-india-poor-fleeing-cities-starvation-a9438401.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/coronavirus-india-poor-fleeing-cities-starvation-a9438401.html). Accessed 28 April 2020.
- Wikipedia. 2020. "List of Epidemics." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_epidemics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_epidemics). Accessed 28 April 2020.