

Keywords, again: provisional reflections from a situated perspective

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has abruptly broken into people's lives and has caused disease and death that, with uneven impact and consequences, have affected the living conditions and cultural behaviours of human societies worldwide. In the Global North, death has entered people's lives anew and invited a pause, a re-thinking about the precariousness of human existence and the (in)ability to deal with it, practically and emotionally. Facing this major event in the history of culture and society, the urge of a culturalist's analysis advises us to examine the output of thinking and argumentation through the interdisciplinary perspective of a conjunctural approach – as theorised by Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg – which attempts to identify and interpret the multiple trajectories and forces that shape crisis and change in society. This article will observe the Covid-19 conversation through the lens of selected keywords. A crucial crossway in the tradition of cultural studies is how major changes in the relationship of culture and society have been interpreted through the emergence and/or revision of keywords. Building on this analytical stance, the article will focus on some keywords as a constellation of relations that, from a situated perspective, provide indications of current drives of change and of future challenges that have emerged during the spread of Covid-19. The topic of this article is indeed emergent and as yet under-theorised. Therefore, the discussion – as a starting point of a larger project – will develop into a conversation with a selection of materials that have most stimulated my interest and concern.

Keywords

cultural studies, immunity, freedom, racism, death, migrant labour, imagination

A conjunctural approach to Covid-19: situatedness, crisis and change

In a rather condensed span of time, the outbreak of Covid-19 has stimulated the substantial production of factual observations, reflections and debates, delivered through a multiplicity of channels and from a variety of perspectives, both for the general public and for specific and focused audiences. The debate has been active in a myriad of discursive arenas, and the central focus on Covid-19 has taken diverse inflections according to disciplinary interests and preoccupations. Printed publication and oral transmission have been surpassed by virtual forms of communication that have allowed the quick and up-to-date diffusion of information and considerations in many disciplinary fields and on specific subjects and concerns. E-books, blogs, podcasts, webinars and open access resources have granted unprecedented free access to online materials offered by publishers, cultural and educational institutions, international agencies, political bodies, associations, groups of activists and private individuals. An

examination of this rich articulation of ideas, however incomplete due to its extensiveness and continuous change, is worth pursuing in the attempt to identify which lines of thought may be helpful to orientate the debate towards the future and possibly to investigate the entangled and confused issues that the coronavirus has brought to the foreground.

Inevitably, this analysis proceeds from the situated perspective that the pandemic has helped to frame, at least in its practical constraints. In February 2020 I left Milan, where I work, due to the spread of Covid-19. Until the end of June, I was physically located in my hometown, close to the Adriatic coast in Northern Italy, and experienced lockdown with my family in a house in the countryside with outside space. The three of us were safe and kept our distance from the world around us, trying to have convivial meetings with our extended family and some friends via social networks. The isolation was emotionally and professionally distressing but manageable: my husband and I could work from home and our daughter attended university lessons online. It was a condition of privilege, which perhaps may not affect my understanding of the existence of different or less privileged situations, but which may hinder my capacity to comprehend them and share their intensity. This partial, brief description becomes relevant when considering the wider spectrum of the impact of Covid-19 worldwide: an angle of observation that places apparent oppositions in relation to one another, the private alongside the public, what is close by versus what is far away, what is specifically contextual set against a multiplicity of conjunctures.

Cultural Studies, an intellectual position and cultural project of political intervention developed on Gramscian key tenets in Stuart Hall's reflections (see Featherstone 2017), focuses on conjuncture as a way of interpreting crisis and change in precise historical moments. Stuart Hall defines a conjuncture as

a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. [...] As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, "fuse in a ruptural unity." (Hall and Massey 2014, 57)

The diffusion of Covid-19 may be interpreted as a conjuncture and may also be "constructed, narrated, fabricated" (Grossberg 2010, 41; 2017) as a moment of crisis. This crisis, it may be argued, predates the pandemic and is fundamentally political (Fraser 2019). Through the inscription of narratological elements, crisis storytelling emerges as a public construction, which is descriptive of a leading trajectory of the present conjuncture as well as a powerful instrument of signification to influence public opinion (De Michelis 2017). In opposition to the widespread diffusion of post-truth, a sharp focus on the essential function of keywords – as methodological tools that may help to identify multiple and conflicting lines of forces operating in the current conjuncture and that are articulated around the fundamental intersection of class, race and gender – seems useful and inspiring.

Lawrence Grossberg and other cultural studies scholars have kept the conversation alive with Stuart Hall's fundamental teaching about examining precise moments of crisis and change against the current configuration of events, relations and conditions, and his mandate to "map a social territory, in order to identify possible sites of political intervention" (Gilbert 2019, 15). Part of this active conversation has been recently published in *New Formations* (2019) and offers a useful theoretical and methodological paradigm for mapping the current Covid-19 condition following the ongoing project of cultural studies "as forms of intellectual experimentation" (Grossberg 2015, 225). Such experimental mapping of a conjuncture requires constant intellectual commitment in conversation with the others invested in the project: "The richer our efforts, the more maps we can construct and relate, the better our understanding of the conjuncture and our imagination of its possible transformations" (Grossberg 2015, 226). While the reference to imagination anticipates the final collaborative keyword of this essay, there are also different precise ideological orientations and pragmatic positions that need to be highlighted. As the following section on racism will try to illustrate, reactions to Covid-19 have manifested ideological polarisations and divides, both on the part of governments and institutions, and of the movements that have emerged in civil society.

Consistent with my approach, I wish to recall another important element in the tradition of cultural studies, that is how major changes in the relationship of culture and society have been identified through the emergence and revision of keywords, as Raymond Williams initiated in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976); as Lawrence Grossberg and others developed in *New Keywords* (2005) by stressing the arising phenomenon of human mobility, which the New Keywords Collective updated with a special focus on borders and migration (2015), and The Keywords Project contributed to expand (2018). Building on this analytical stance, I wish to focus on some keywords that, to my understanding and sensibility from a situated perspective, may provide indications of the changes that have taken place during the spread of the coronavirus. However, the analysis will not develop according to a vocabulary of single lemmas, as in cultural studies tradition, nor will it revise that tradition. Keywords will be used, instead, as interconnected perspectives allowing for a conjunctural approach to Covid-19 and will be presented in clusters that make their relations and concatenation explicit. These keywords are not new; they have been operating practically in society and latent in public discourse and in scholarly thinking for quite a while. Covid-19 has brought them to the foreground and laden them with meanings that may require new eyes and new lenses in order to make the forces at work visible (see Fraser 2019; "Renew Normal" 2020). Perhaps, and hopefully, the moment is now ripe to confront some substantial predicaments of the present time (see Bailey 2020), which an awareness of human precariousness and the manifest presence of death have forcefully brought to the forefront.

My intellectual training in postcolonial studies urges me to carefully consider uneven power relationships, dynamics of racial exclusion in social interactions, inequalities, exploita-

tion of subaltern groups, and imperial drives, as well as to maintain a perceptive position towards forms of dissent, resistance and political engagement. The contiguity of cultural studies and postcolonial studies allows for a wide-ranging perspective that, from the contextual analysis of specific moments in history (spatially and temporally defined) and from the excavation of unbalances of power and strategies of opposition, attempts to envision pragmatic actions in the present that may reverberate changes across other spaces and future temporalities (see Gualtieri 2019). Along this line, in order to frame my discussion within broadly interlaced disciplinary fields, let me begin with a few initiatives that attracted my attention – as they pertain to the humanities and social sciences – and point to a variety of matters and apprehensions during this pandemic. Of course, the topic under scrutiny in this article is quite new and under-theorised, therefore my presentation will develop, mainly, in the form of a survey and a conversation about part of the materials that have most stimulated my reasoning and feelings.

The everyday

The Department of Psychology of the American University of Paris organised the comprehensive ten-day virtual conference “Psychology of Global Crises: State Surveillance, Solidarity and Everyday Life,” in order to discuss, from a variety of critical angles, “the impact of past and current, global and local crises on everyday life” as sparked by recent developments. Major questions raised regarded the contribution of social sciences to understand the crisis; the voices which are heard; the diverse effects of the crisis and how individuals and communities are affected differently. Attention to everyday life is central in trying to understand the long-standing consequences of the present pandemic, as this focus dismantles the homogenising perception disseminated through globalisation by drawing attention to specific localisms, communities, movements and personal experiences. The person is explored as a microcosm that manifests the worries, dangers and challenges of the global pandemic on an individual scale. What emerges, among the range of themes and critical angles, is the evidence of personal affective reactions to the pandemic and its induced consequences.

A critical view of the everyday and of the restricted situated condition is useful to draw attention to the daily routine that has been upset by the advent of Covid-19 and the imposed lockdown. By forcing a suspension of usual actions, the pandemic has contributed to alter the use of time, and even its perception, hence changing prearranged projects and lifestyles. Invocations of a return to normality, which may qualify conditions of privilege, clash with ‘abnormal’ states where basic life conditions and needs are unattainable in different coexisting contexts (see Di Grazia 2020; Rovatti 2020a, 2020b; Temelkuran 2020). This is evident in the exploitation of migrant labour, in the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in many parts of the world and, from a general viewpoint, in the struggle of Black Lives Matter and similar movements, as discussed further on. The perspective derived from cultural studies, borrowing Grossberg’s words, entails the epistemic, affective, demanding effort to imagine better maps

and better stories in order to make sense of empirical complexities and offer possible useful interpretations.

In “The Hermeneutics of Crisis and the Crisis of Interpretation” (2020), Brian Schiff tries to answer the question “what is the emerging story that we are making of Covid?” by pointing to the cacophony of interpretations in the social sphere. Conversations are neither stable nor converging, and there are also instrumental narratives strategically framed for intended goals. In addition, the amplitude of racist stereotypes, symbolic violence and hate speech make the crisis of signification even more manifest. Schiff argues in favour of drafting shared interpretations in the midst of the pandemic by trying to make sense of the past, of the crisis and of possible futures through a narrative repair: an interpretative repair of social and collective memory, which he terms “stories in the making,” where people can find their place in solidarity. What words and stories we want to hold onto during the crisis as a means to interpret and bridge past, present and future, is part of our present quest.

For Italian readers, the reflections by Italian philosophers and scholars that originated from the pandemic and were published in *aut aut*, from 7 April to 1 June 2020, engage in a provocative conversation on the intertwined aspects of the pandemic. What I especially appreciate of the ten interventions is the power of their language, which inspires a call to arms for progressive intellectuals. The clarity of expression that materialises and personalises every reaction to the pandemic works pedagogically as an engine to understand, question, debate and contribute to deep thinking. The pedagogical effort is central both to cultural studies and to postcolonial studies as an unavoidable step towards critical awareness and political action. While the contributions in *aut aut* alert against the urge to voice quick interpretations and instant solutions to the pandemic, Pierangelo Di Vittorio’s “La realtà e i cowboy. A proposito del più grande evento mediatico della storia” (“Reality and Cowboys: On the Biggest Media Event in History,” 2020; my translation) expresses the difficulty of elaborating a coherent narrative against the noise of dominant discourses and the spectacularization of events produced by the media and online storytelling. The increased use of digitalisation expands its power to standardise behaviours and trends with the effect of a “mediatisation of everyday lives” that fabricates substitution for facts (2020; my translation). In Di Vittorio’s argument, the *mise-en-scène* of the reality of catastrophe – which he terms “the selfie with the virus” (2020; my translation) – is provoking altered perceptions of reality centred on the self and on the reality show of daily lives. Di Vittorio claims that the hypertrophy of media connection prompts an isolation of the self that obfuscates reality as the place of possible relationships, of unexpected encounters, surprising occurrences and heterogeneous differences.

I have selected Di Vittorio’s statement because it contains references to the notions of alterity and community that are embedded in the idea of reality. As a matter of fact, the imposition of lockdown to control the diffusion of the virus, and the spread of contagion and death, has provoked opposite reactions that, at their extremes, slanted in favour of protective

measures or, conversely, against restrictions. The contrast has been evident with reference to ways in which governments have managed confinement, either by adopting restrictive measures justified by safeguarding the community, as in the case of Italy for example, or by embracing a protective policy of an uncompromising neoliberal economy and unrestrained individual freedom as in Donald Trump's United States of America. At a deeper level of analysis, these attitudes are indicative of opposed ideological positions as regards the notion and use of freedom in relation to the person and the community.

Immunity, freedom, responsibility

In a lecture delivered online on 25 May 2020, titled "Immunitas: Pratiche immunitarie tra politica e medicina" ("Immunitas: Practices of Immunity between Politics and Medicine"; my translation) the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito explains how the need for immunisation is inherent in modernity, as a form of rationalisation, legitimation and protection of the community that offers security against the perception of risk and prevents contagion (political, social, and biological) through the State, the law and medicine. Esposito claims that we are now at the apex of a process according to which "immunisation has become a form of life" (2020; my translation). However, it would be too simplistic to think of immunisation as a phenomenon born with the Covid-19 pandemic. On the contrary, it has been in place for a long time due to the fact that immunisation is a typical procedure in every society, as Nadia Urbinati and other experts have argued (Esposito 2020). On these grounds, Esposito's analysis is fascinatingly clear and convincing in that it explains how community and immunity, far from indicating oppositional categories, are two complementary notions and must work in balance. Immunity is a negative category: excessive protection might eliminate forms of societal life and produce kinds of political monotheism which clash against each other. A short circuit between risk perception and immunisation may be dangerous as well. In order to imagine feasible political and ethical life projects on a national level, Esposito claims that, because an element of immunisation is embedded in the technical structure of democracy, the balance between immunity and community may be preserved by keeping conflict as a constitutive part of democracy itself. Democratic institutions perhaps take this duty as a political form of constructive conflict: institutionalising movements and mobilising institutions will generate dynamics capable of transforming the institutions themselves into novel instituting bodies.

Esposito's discussion is useful in order to address the notion of freedom in democratic countries, in conversation with Giorgio Agamben's contributions on Quodlibet website and Jean-Luc Nancy's contribution to the Padua Freedom Lecture "Pour libérer la liberté." In "The Invention of an Epidemic" (2020), Agamben expresses disagreement about imposed lockdowns in countries of the Global North, which he interprets as a manoeuvre, sustained through instilling fear, that forces unnecessary limitations on personal freedom and may facilitate the expansion of the state of exception. In a number of contributions, he develops this line of

thought by protesting against the fear of others as potentially infected, which produces a degeneration of human relationships while also strongly restraining personal freedom. Agamben's argument is not in line with populist proclamations, and it has been criticised by those who highlight the need to regulate the delicate relationship between individual free will and the collective responsibility of trying to do the right thing (see Nancy 2020c; Žižek 2020). Clearly, the discussion includes references to how democracy is implemented and managed as a system in order to regulate and protect common living *vis-à-vis* personal liberty.

Individual freedom is one of the most cherished principles of modern societies, as Nancy explains in "Pour libérer la liberté." However, the liberty to choose, to exercise free judgement, to act according to free independent decisions is an illusion of modernity. A subject's self-determination is impossible to achieve, precisely because nobody is in the position to control their lives fully. For Nancy, the exercise of individual liberty is possible contextually: in fact, freedom is not a possession nor a stable quality of the person but may mark a path for the free invention of a new self to come. From this suggestion it is plausible to derive an idea of procedural freedom, which is not simply a set of codified practices institutionally guaranteed but is fabricated and redirected on the basis of social relationships and needs, as philosophical reflections have proposed for quite a long time. Such conviction leads to considerations about commonality and responsibility in democratic contexts, which may be envisaged as forms of mediation for today. During this pandemic, we must internalise rules of caution which should be interpreted as free responsible choices instead of external impositions. Responsibility is an ethical category and ethics is part of politics, Esposito claims. Responsible freedom is therefore an attitude that is respectful of the person and the community. In this sense, it may lead towards regeneration.

This ethical and pragmatic orientation does not seem to have political actualisation in deeply polarised societies where wide-spread inequalities regulate not only access to freedom, but also differential protection of human rights and life itself. Notwithstanding the variety of organisational and legal procedures adopted in the Global North, how enforced lockdown has affected people in countries of the Global South betrays the variables of life conditions, access to privilege and exposure to death. In a number of articles, Arundhati Roy (2020a, 2020b) has described the situation following the emergence of Covid-19 and imposed lockdown in India, clearly addressing the question of right-wing-oriented governments. In "The Pandemic Is a Portal" (2020b), Roy observes India by establishing a network of relations with concomitant political actions in the United States, China and Brazil, using the lens of the social divide established by wealth and poverty, and an analytical insight into instrumental political priorities regardless of people's lives. An observation of the chronology of subsequent events in India since December 2019 shows the sudden political shift of Narendra Modi's government from the denial of a pandemic to the implementation of lockdown in the space of four hours, on 24 March. Millions of poor people were expelled from Indian megacities without food, housing,

work or a place to go. It is now well known that they embarked on long journeys towards their villages: it was a humanitarian disaster of people dying from distress, starvation and police violence along the road. Indeed, the lockdown to enforce physical distance provoked the opposite. Roy is extremely detailed in describing the Indian government's appalling neglect of the needs of the majority of its people, its manipulation of information in order to divert popular attention with palliatives and to identify potential enemies in order to disaggregate social bonds and keep the "prevailing prejudices of religion, class and caste completely in place" (2020b). She envisages this current condition both as a rupture and an opportunity that "in the midst of this terrible despair [...] offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. [This pandemic] is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (2020b). A keyword may then be 'imagination', as a way of pushing thinking and imagining beyond the borders that up to now have constrained the possibility of more humane and just living conditions.

Roy also addresses the questions of accountability and justice in "After the Lockdown, We Need a Reckoning" (2020a), in which she details the costs of Modi's management of the pandemic in terms of unemployment, personal distress and death of poor people. It is not a mere calculation, but an open and passionate alert, both to the Indian nation and to the international community, of how "untouchability" (as a form of caste apartheid in Indian social structure and of religious apartheid being implemented against Muslim citizenship in India) may come to signify that "the very bodies of one class are seen as a biohazard to another." Accountability for this separation which affects working conditions and the distribution of jobs and wealth in the entire world, with inevitable racist inflections, will have to be precisely assigned, independently from the virus (see Jones 2020a, 2020b).

Indian women intellectuals confirm Roy's analyses (see Chaudhary 2020; Zahbi 2020); among them is Anita Gulumurthy, in a conversation with Annalisa Oboe and Claudia Padovani at the "Women, Leadership and Sustainability in Critical Times" webinar, on 5 June.¹ Within the frame of a reflection on the function of knowledge and the leading processes in contemporary societies *vis-à-vis* gender inequality, taking the lead from the Covid-19 crisis, Gulumurthy points to the invisibility and disposability of women in societies dominated by the decay of public institutions, masculine war rhetoric and authoritarian capitalism. In India, there has been a collapse in public space for women because of poverty and state autocracy, and the occasion has been favourable for attacks on democratic institutions, as in other countries (see Harari 2020). From a perspective of gender affirmation, Gulumurthy advocates that from the margins people find new spaces to reclaim their voice. Feminists of all genders will need to disenfranchise themselves and step up by establishing multiple networks of their locales. It is a position in favour of gender innovation, which is important to raise as a keyword in connection with related essential concepts that Covid-19 has brought to the foreground: racism and labour. An intriguing feature of the keywords that I have selected as descriptive of the coronavirus phase

is their interconnectedness. They combine in a logical chain, building on each other to form a composite picture, an ideological and ethical map for reflection and action.

Racism and death

Racism is an ample and complex category because it spans a variety of subjects, objects, conscious and unconscious reactions and dynamics. It sits ambiguously at the back of our minds and deep into our feelings, rooted in inherited words, images, actions and perceptions. It is also shifting and unstable, in ways that inferiority, subordination and fear may be activated depending on the perspective and relationship, both at an individual and collective level. In “What Black America Means to Europe” (2020), Gary Younge constructs a narrative of how racial crimes in the US in the last decades have been reported in the UK, also referring back to colonial times, and examines the recent reaction to the murder of George Floyd throughout Europe. He draws a picture of the roots of racial thinking in Europe and the US and demonstrates how a selective amnesia operates in European thinking to the extent that American racism provokes more indignation than similar practices in Europe. The prevalence of racism in Europe today is clearly visible in the resurgence of fascism, the unfair treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, hate speech and violence. Comparisons invite forms of self-absolution for many white European liberals, Younge claims, as if there can be degrees of admissible racism (see Gilroy et al. 2019; Mba 2020). Only deep engagement and honest questioning of existing racial sediments, categories and behaviours may help change, as racism is embedded in many accepted and unquestioned leading principles of human life and actions.

The ways in which the emergence of Covid-19 has been managed and the high rate of people affected by the virus who are living in poor conditions in countries of the Global North have brought the issue of racism to the foreground due to the manifest connection between poverty and colour. Commenting on popular reactions to lockdown in the United States in “Anti-Lockdown Protesters Have a Twisted Conception of Liberty” (2020), Jamelle Bouie highlights the concept that anti-lockdown protesters’ “notion of freedom derives a lot of its power from the enforcement of racial hierarchy.” Numerically, these protesters may not be a huge number, but it is a fact that the majority of them are white: a calculation that contrasts with the high number of victims of the coronavirus who are mainly brown and black. In Bouie’s argument, today’s demand to reopen the economy in the United States is closely related to ‘whiteness’ and to the assertion of white racial identity as being inherently constituted through self-determination, autonomous will and capacity of control. The combination of whiteness, freedom and autonomy establishes a racial order that cannot be challenged or modified, and which is kept by exercising the right to control. Bouie claims that, in the particular context of a deadly pandemic, this attitude proclaims an absolute predominance of the individual choice over a communal one: “the demand to be free of mutual obligation is, in essence, a demand to be free to die and threaten those around you with illness and death.” This dangerous and powerful

meaning of freedom seems to be informing the political strategy of Donald Trump's presidency (see Bloomfield 2020; Butler 2020; Olivarius 2020).

Death strongly emerges as another keyword, which is embedded in the notion of racism and is also part of the rhetoric of Covid-19. Zadie Smith, in "The American Exception" (2020), constructs a story of a modern United States and analyses how death, for the white wealthy population, has been long negated and ignored in this country's history: "I wish we could have our old life back," Smith quotes from Trump without naming him, "we didn't have death." The kind of death the US has in its history, Smith reveals, "always involved some culpability on the part of the dead," thus liberating the State and the community from accountability. However, on occasion of the pandemic the whole nation is facing death at a higher rate in comparison with other countries in the world. Smith concludes her analysis hoping that the evident perception of death will induce a change in the central focus on private interests in favour of a collective vision of equal health opportunities. Politically, it is a controversial proposal in a country where the partial conquests that Obama Care succeeded in implementing are being demolished, police killing is a consolidated practice, and life, death and care have different weights and rights according to colour. Indeed, as Christopher Lee argues, "Covid-19 isn't simply a medical or epidemiological crisis; it is a crisis of sovereignty" (2020; see also Runciman 2020).

The reference to the current situation in the United States is not functional in reinstating the centrality of the Global North when it is affected by problems that the Global South has already experienced at a high degree, but it is used, instead, as an example of the systemic crisis of the West (of its social, economic, and governmental structures). It is important that the Global North abandons imperial attitudes and starts dealing with the Global South on equal grounds and through respectful dialogue. This perspective was put forth on 13 April 2020, almost a month before the murder of George Floyd on 25 May in Minneapolis by a police officer, when Achille Mbembe published "The Universal Right to Breathe" on the blog of the academic journal *Critical Inquiry* (2020). His essay strikingly identifies the ways in which 'breathing' – the right to rights – is managed, distributed, allocated and protected, in what conditions and for whom. Mbembe's argument offers a radical critical angle over mortality that takes the lead from the basic right to have access to air and also reveals an approach to life informed by African philosophies. It also offers a perspective on immortality, our own and that of the planet, which is increasingly exposed to danger and risk. Life on earth is a shared condition, a communal experience in which we physically participate with our bodies: the earth extends to include our cultures and communities. Mbembe writes that we are now living, symbolically and practically, in the absence of air. Environment, human beings and worldviews are strangled by injustice, disrespect and immobility. In the same way, Covid-19 acts by taking air away. Mbembe's pragmatic, but nonetheless idealistic suggestion, is not to wage war

against a specific virus as against everything that condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing, everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression. (2020)

Breathing, then, becomes a universal right that cannot be appropriated, expressive of what people have in common: a right to life (physical and social, spiritual and factual, individual and communal). The murder of George Floyd by chokehold signals how difficult the intellectual and civil commitment that Mbembe advises, and that Black Lives Matter has undertaken, is. This movement, which has acquired strength due to the concomitant visibility of social and institutionalised racism in Covid-19 times and the death of George Floyd, is exemplary of extensive militant engagement on the issue of racism, and it sheds light on the possibility of imagining and narrating new stories.

Vis-à-vis the difficulty of interpretation of the events caused by the coronavirus worldwide and the contemporary rise of anti-racist movements, *The Johannesburg Review of Books* has worked to express “solidarity with the progressive literary community and all who fight racism and anti-Black violence” by proposing a “Pan-African anti-racism and solidarity reading list” that promotes the importance of literature as a tool for imagination, understanding and activism. In “They Hate Us like We Murdered Their Entire Family,” Adam Smyer constructs a ‘what-if’ story of impossible causes for the real facts of racism and provocatively speaks against feel-good and do-good attitudes. In the same journal, Wamuni Mbao unpacks the tradition of police murdering civilians in “What Continuities Can Be Drawn from the Murder of Ahmed Timol in Apartheid Joburg to the Killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis?” and demonstrates the network of racism that connects precise events in distant places and times.

I have briefly quoted a few examples that support the force of civil society, of the movements that have generated voice, visibility and action against racism worldwide. They are reinforced in principle by shared ideological and ethical visions and by the cohesion of common goals on which the Left could capitalise, but their struggles take different forms in diverse contexts (see Sandbrook 2020). At this point in my article, I would like to address a specific form of struggle in the time of the coronavirus: that of migrant labour against invisibility.

Migrant labour

A personal reference may help to define my situatedness. One year ago, in *From the European South* (5, 2019), I edited a Special Focus on “Mobility, Immobility and Encounters along the South-North European Route” in order to investigate how institutional constraints on migrant mobility contribute to establishing hostile environments and impact the condition of crisis, risk and new regionalisms in Europe. On the pages of a previous issue of *FES*, in “Bodies as Borders,” Achille Mbembe exposes “a novel imbrication, a symbiotic merging of life and mobility [and] a bifurcation between life on the one hand and bodies on the other hand” which

produces “*discounted bodies [as] movements and events*” (2019, 10-11). In his analysis, mobility impinges on bodies through the category of identity and generates different regimes of freedom that are closely related to strategies of securitisation, as far as migrant mobility is concerned. Mbembe’s reflection sheds light on the current conditions of the pandemic in two ways that are worth highlighting: the different ways in which global mobility has been restricted by lockdown and how the connection of mobility and life leads to further considerations on freedom, racism and death (see Bhabha 2018; Filippi 2020).

It has been superficially argued that lockdown has made immobility a shared condition. On the contrary, Covid-19 has loaded the notions of mobility and the right to move with specificities that have altered the value of mobility as an analytical tool. In “Locked Up in a Lockdown Country” (2020), Ishiaba Kasonga describes the degrees to which the restriction of mobility has affected the condition of migrants in detention centres in the United Kingdom and how the exposure to the risk of death in these centres, and in conditions of unprotected release, also makes diverse forms of death manifest, as is thoroughly documented in the “Report on European Pre-removal Detention Centers during the Covid-19 Pandemic” (2020), elaborated by the Turin-based research group of Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic and the CPR-Research Group under the supervision of Emanuela Roman, Ulrich Stege, and Maurizio Veglio.

Categories of mobility and immobility are not proven to be sufficiently descriptive of the condition of the exploitation of labour of many undocumented migrants, who have rapidly become temporarily invisible, absent from the public national space, as Omid Firouzi Tabar writes in “Le migrazioni nella Pandemia” (“Migrations in the Time of Pandemic” 2020; my translation). In Italy, Firouzi Tabar argues, the construction of the enemy, which has animated anti-migration political rhetoric and media discourse in recent years, now silently operates through a total annihilation of the migrant (as they suddenly disappeared from public discourse) as well as through an overt use of the enemy-construction rhetoric by displacing the strategy of de-politicisation and de-subjectification onto the virus. It is necessary to reclaim these “temporarily empty spaces” and reconfigure a public narrative that establishes a new “regime of truth,” Firouzi proclaims (2020; my translation).

In Italy, migrant labour is indispensable in agriculture, for the functioning of the food industry and the care of elderly people: Covid-19 has made this clear. To affirm the visibility and value of this labour through a resolute call to action for the legal recognition of workers’ rights is a site of struggle that a heterogeneous civil movement consisting of a number of organisations – such as Euronomade, ASGI (Association for legal studies on immigration), local organisations, charities and educational institutions – is trying to pursue. I share Sandro Mezzadra’s opinion that how the coronavirus has been managed is in itself a site of conflict, as he argues in “A Politics of Struggles in Times of Pandemic” (2020), and that “the intensification of social struggles (now and in-coming months) may open spaces of democracy and of ‘cura’ [in the

dual form of ‘care’ and ‘healing’] of the common” (Mezzadra 2020, 7). The coronavirus has exposed these spaces as platforms for engagement: public health, education, labour, the prison system, migration and Europe. And that there is space for civil movements, for social struggles, and for the Left to rebuild a new courageous narrative that should take the lead from the protection of the common (see Nancy 2020a). It is important to point out that the struggle is international, because the common is constitutive of human life: its care and healing are matters of shared responsibility and safeguarding (see Mezzadra 2019 and Biao 2020).

Of course, it is a general suggestion that requires committed politicians and skilled experts working across a variety of fields to be implemented. Economics is not my expertise; however, scholars as diverse as Joseph Stiglitz, Robert Skidelsky, Thomas Piketty and Mariana Mazzucato concur in centring their analyses on how to reform modern capitalism while keeping a sharper focus on the ethics of the common. In *The Value of Everything* (2018), in particular, Mazzucato deals with the question of the production of value in order to observe technological change through the lens of a revised sustainable economic programme that may equip us for more humane forms of sharing.

Imagination

The effort to fight against death, to share affectively the mourning that has hit everybody, and to try and imagine a better world, starting from the disconcerting and painful situation that Covid-19 has provoked, has begun under the rubric of commonality. Black Lives Matter is a popular example, but there is also local, national and transnational activism, as I have tried to show through the mentioning of Italian cases. Relevant models of intellectual militancy and pragmatic contribution are those of African intellectuals who have co-signed a “call to mobilize the intelligence, resources and creativity of Africans to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic” (Nubukpo et al. 2020) and of African thinkers, writers, and academics who have written an open letter to “urge the continent’s leaders to use coronavirus pandemic crisis as opportunity to ‘spur’ radical change” (Soyinka et al. 2020; see also Idrissa 2020). These messages are for common people, intellectuals, educational institutions, political leaders and members of informal sectors alike, as positive exemplary moves.

The distribution of the message and its language are important to counter the arrogant voice of fake news, narcotic information, the confusion and reiterated superficial noise of multiple media and network channels. To tell new stories is the goal of Kenyan journalist Nanjala Nyabola’s “Africa Is Not Waiting to Be Saved from the Coronavirus” (2020), which announces two stories to describe the reactions to the pandemic in Kenya. While criticising the rhetoric of the media which report chronicles of bad government and killing, she raises the story of “communities knitting together their meager resources to fill the gap of failed services and absent states.” Nyabola favours narratives from African communities that do not leave space for neo-colonial interpretations and are appropriate to fill African archives.

From the Global South, suggestions and indications anticipated by intellectuals like Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Jean and John Comaroff in *Epistemologies of the South* (2014) and *Theories from the South* (2011), are also coming. Imagination may be the proper function to overcome the crisis of interpretation that Covid-19 has helped to reveal. We were “unprepared,” as Homi Bhabha contends in a conversation with Margaret MacMillan (2020). Unpreparedness may come from a number of reasons and may be the result of an addiction to routine, a disregard for facts, a laziness of sight, listening and thinking, which Covid-19 has exposed and magnified. The sadness of the contemporary crisis as a moment of unpreparedness, Bhabha argues, is caused exactly by the very condition of our unpreparedness to confront it; explicitly, I would add, to confront death. Indeed, the abrupt entrance of disease and death has shown the precariousness of human existence and our (in)capacity to deal with it, practically and emotionally. Therefore, imagination is the keyword I have chosen to round off this article, to be approached at least in two broad senses, as I have shown in the previous sections: imagination is needed in order to devise new programmes of civil activism and political governance, and it is essential in order to envision and narrate new stories (see Boochani 2018, 2020).

The keywords presented here in their essential relationality tend to develop and cluster around fundamental conflicting and divisive issues of our time. Keeping relationality as a major cohering element, these keywords form a constellation, as it were, of evolving relations and concatenations that draw tentative maps of a conjuncture; through this, Covid-19 has helped to bring to the surface and accelerate some key tensions and contradictions. Making sense of the present conjuncture – of the paradigm shift referred to as “interregnum” by Antonio Gramsci – is part of the ethical commitment of cultural studies (see Chakrabarty 2009).

Notes

¹ The webinar was organised by the ‘Elena Cornaro’ Centre for Gender Studies at Padua University.

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