BOOK REVIEWS

Lynteris, Christos 2019. *Human Extinction and the Pandemic Imaginary.* Routledge Studies in Anthropology. London & New York: Routledge. 177 p. ISBN: 9780367338145 (hardcover); ISBN: 9780429322051 (E-book).

The last twenty years have seen a growing interest in pandemics from a social scientific perspective. The programmatic article published by Collier, Lakoff, and Rabinow (2004) served as starting point through its call for a social analysis of biosecurity processes. Although biosecurity is not concerned exclusively with pandemic threats, these have in practice been the common way to explore the topic. The collection of articles that have discussed the topic during the last two decades have given especial attention to the governmental and scientific aspects of pandemic governance. Lynteris' book brings attention to the cultural dimension of pandemics, without forgetting to draw connections between this and the already mentioned and widely-explored scientific and governmental aspects. Lynteris does this without giving up a critical outlook on the notion of culture and refers to the collection of 'ideas, policies, anticipations, and representations' (p. 2) of the next pandemic as a *pandemic imaginary*. Given the prominent role of the governmental and scientific elements in the general literature on pandemics, this merging effort by Lynteris is valuable from its very inception.

The book makes an explicit argument for the value of taking cultural products such as series, films, or videogames seriously. However, Lynteris does not remain stuck on movies, TV series, and videogames. He advocates instead for a 'telescopic vision' (p. xi), which spans from Thucydides' classic accounts of the Athenian

plague to popular videogames like The Last of Us, without ignoring communication campaigns by institutions like the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Such a vision helps us broaden our focus from presentist understandings of pandemics, drawing connections that an exclusive analysis of ongoing scientific and governmental interventions would not allow for. The approach also bridges the contemporary modes of human existence to a redefinition of what is to be human as a result of a pandemic outbreak. Although the title of the book reads 'human extinction', the book takes that expression to mean something somewhat more complex than the disappearance of the human species. Rather, the extinction of humanity is an event whereby humanity ceases to be human as we know it, through its mastering of the nonhuman, technology, and the consequent self-differentiation from nature. Thus, the pandemic imaginary does not draw so much on what happens during a pandemic, but the inevitable aftermath.

The book is organised into 5 main chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The introduction serves to lay down some of the basic concepts for the rest of the book: pandemic imaginary (a notion inspired for the author by the work of Cornelius Castoriadis) and human extinction. Chapter 1 explores the temporal dimension of pandemic imaginaries, whereby a pandemic apocalypse does not lead to 'the end of time', but rather to 'the time of the end', that

is, the period during which the end is delayed. During 'the time of the end' humanity is stripped from technological mastery and 'returns' to its original nature, that of biological survival. Chapter 2 explores the zoonotic dimension of the imaginary, which follows upon the idea that a virus of pandemic potential lurks in the animal realm, waiting to jump the interspecies barrier to threaten humanity. Chapter 3 analyses the mythical character of the *super-spreader*, and how it emerges in fictional and technoscientific narratives. The super-spreader becomes the main pandemic driver after the zoonotic spillover by helping to propagate the virus. While in popular culture the dehumanised super-spreader is best represented by the zombified crowds of infected, in classical literature the super-spreader takes the shape of an anti-promethean character that, instead of bringing *techné* from the gods, takes it away. Chapter 4 presents the antithesis of the super-spreader, the epidemiologist as the ultimate saviour, fully reliant on technoscience to face the threat posed by the nonhuman threat of the virus and its super-spreader collaborator. Here, a narrative of salvation, instead of one of extinction is enacted. Chapter 5 explores the post-pandemic world, when earth space is reclaimed by nature. This is visually represented by the occupation of urban spaces by plants and nonhuman animals. Human survivors, however, tend to remain *unwild*, struggling to reinvent themselves meaningfully in relation to the world. In the conclusion, Lynteris formulates a critique on the ubiquitous narrative of the post-apocalyptic as the result of the demise of capitalism—'*capitalism ou barabarie*' (p. 136). The book reformulates this in terms of what is, from my reading, the key tenet of the book: that the pandemic imaginary enacts the human struggle, and ultimately the inability, to re-emerge in a world that is itself re-emerging as the result of the loss of human mastery.

Throughout the book, Lynteris eloquently builds a narrative of human civilization and its extinction that helps to understand the underlying notions that underpin the pandemic imaginary. At the conceptual centre of the book lies a 'temporal reversal' entangled in biblical narratives of an apocalyptic return to anomy. While the biblical narratives used by Lynteris put anomy as a state marking the border before the end of time, current strategies to tackle pandemics, that is, preparedness (Anderson 2010), turn the end of time into a state of anomy triggered by a pandemic. In other words, pandemics can make the (human) world anomic, without a strict ending of it.

This ties in with another key argument in the book. In popular discourse, humans become humans through the mastering of technology. It is technology that allows humans to separate themselves from other animals and, as a result, to be able to stand outside nature. Human extinction does not necessarily mean the end of the human species in a biological sense (although it can mean that) but instead the end of technological mastery, forcing humans to return to their nonhuman/animal/natural status. A pandemic of existential magnitude (i.e. a pandemic that poses a threat to human existence), is the perfect cultural trope to explore human extinction, because by definition, it means the failure of technique, that is, the failure of medical, governmental, and scientific techniques and knowledge to stop a natural threat.

The different political, scientific, and cultural narratives that Lynteris explores anticipate a future that engages with those elements in one way or another. However, not all the narratives align with one another. This is perhaps a potential point for a criticism of the way Lynteris conceptualizes the notion of imaginary. Despite the multiplicity present

across the many narratives discussed, the notion of imaginary remains single in its conceptualization, despite literature arguing for an understanding of pandemics in terms of virtual phenomena (Samimian-Darash 2013). I wonder whether it would be more fit here to talk about plural imaginaries instead.

Another potential criticism has to do with the selection of empirical material. The analysis offered by the book is well-conducted and relevant. All the cases offer something interesting to illustrate the general argument of the book. However, it is unclear how the material was selected and why some prominent examples of fictional productions that could have greatly enriched the analysis are left out. The author chooses to integrate the TV version of *The Walking Dead* into the analysis without mention of the original comic, which explores in much more detail the social, political, and human aspects of a zombie apocalypse. The author also leaves out the TV rendition of Terry Gilliam's *12 monkeys* which, given the author's interest in time, would have made a fine addition to the list of analysed material. Although one can hardly include all available material in an analysis, I think an explanation of the criteria for selecting the material used in the book would have helped to make the analysis stronger.

It is hard to avoid the reflection that there is something odd in reading a book about a pandemic *imaginary* as we go through a full-blown pandemic, with very material consequences. However, Lynteris' book helps to put the works of fiction that it cites into perspective, together with their irremediable post-pandemic worlds of survival, full of humans resisting their reintegration into nature. Most importantly, it helps to put into perspective the no-less-exaggerated (and often fiction-inspired, see Elbe, Roemer-Mahler, and Long 2014) sociotechnical narratives that

have motivated the spread of pandemic preparedness as part of quasi-obligatory policy packages coming from WHO and supported by a varied list of international development actors, most prominently exemplified by the International Health Regulations (World Health Organization 2005).

Lynteris' book shows clear connections between available narratives to experience biological emergencies and the measures at hand to handle a pandemic. By showing the wide span of the pandemic imaginary, and the way it is adopted and used by many different actors in western society, the book opens the door to continue exploring the significance of the apparently superfluous and its impact on our experienced reality. But ultimately, the book is at its most inspiring in its depiction of humanity's struggle to reinvent itself in relation to our environment. This is a struggle that we witness not only during pandemic times, but also more generally, as we face the environmental challenges resulting from the Anthropocene and its extractive relation to earth and nonhuman animals.

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