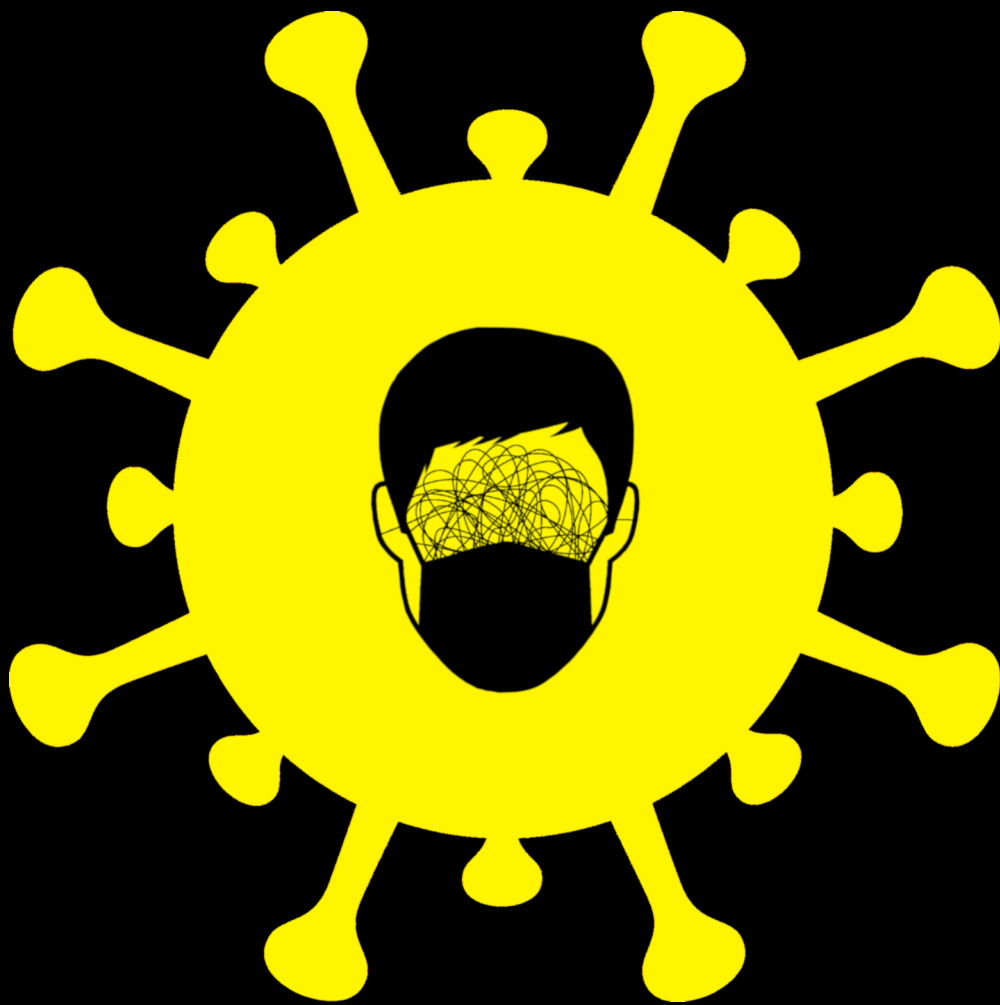


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Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



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Examining Pandemic Futurity

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Abstract:

'The future' is difficult to define. As with 'time' more generally, it has twin social and ontological connotations. This essay considers what Adam and Groves (2007) call "the present future" and "the future present". The former being "process-based perspectives on futurity" like anticipatory knowledge practices and the latter being "the future as both an effecting process and/or as living" (Adam and Groves, 2007: 176). Covid-19 reinforces the necessity for the futures we envisage and enact in the twenty-first century to diverge from anthropocentrism towards an ethics of care whilst simultaneously acknowledging structural impediments to environmental, economic, and epidemiological justice. This article reaches these considerations in two ways. The first examines how the pandemic has transformed lived relationships with the future. The second links these relationships with the future to broader political temporalities including future-oriented governance. It is worth noting further here that these reflections are oriented predominantly towards the experience of the pandemic in the United Kingdom, given the extent to which they derive from my own experience. I believe, however, that they give rise to ideas and themes relevant in diverse historico-geographical contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19, Human Geography, Capitalocene, Political Futurities

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered the temporalities of social life in diverse ways. As a milestone of the ascendant Capitalocene (Moore, 2017; Moore, 2018) it has implications for demarcating historical time. Through the alteration, proscription, or acceleration of our communal social rhythms it has warped our sense of the durational present. And, further, it has affected our shared and intimate relationships with the future. It is on this last point that this piece focuses, offering initial reflections on what I call 'pandemic futurity', or how the Covid-19 pandemic has changed how we live the future-in-the-present. Central to this approach is a political-ecological recognition that the Covid-19 pandemic provokes fundamental questions about our entangled socio-ecological relationships within the biophysical world. This essay is not, however, an attempt at further interrogating understandings of the relationship between and within society/capitalism and nature (Malm 2019; Moore 2015). Instead, it takes the Covid-19 pandemic as a starting point from which to analyse the temporalities of

the pandemic and how the dynamic, ever-changing presence of the virus-in-society impacts our relationship to, and experience of, 'the future'.

'The future' is difficult to define. As with 'time' more generally, it has twin social and ontological connotations. This essay considers what Adam and Groves (2007) call "the present future" and "the future present". The former being "process-based perspectives on futurity" like anticipatory knowledge practices and the latter being "the future as both an effecting process and/or as living" (Adam and Groves 2007: 176). Covid-19 reinforces the necessity for the futures we envisage and enact in the twenty-first century to diverge from anthropocentrism towards an ethics of care whilst simultaneously acknowledging structural impediments to environmental, economic, and epidemiological justice. This article reaches these considerations in two ways. The first examines how the pandemic has transformed lived relationships with the future. The second links these relationships with the future to broader political temporalities including future-oriented governance. It is worth noting further here that these reflections are oriented predominantly towards the experience of the pandemic in the United Kingdom, given the extent to which they derive from my own experience. I believe, however, that they give rise to ideas and themes relevant in diverse historico-geographical contexts.

Lived Futures

We live towards the future in a fashion that can be described as "teleoaffective" (Bryant and Knight 2019; Schatzki 2010). The future-oriented dimensions of social life relationally manifest themselves at various levels, from the individual – as our embodied, phenomenological relationship of the future – to the intersubjective, institutional, and discursive. The semiotic and material resonance of the pandemic has, I argue, altered these dynamics in countless ways. In unpacking this, I start at the experiential level by firstly considering the anticipatory timescales of lived practice before moving to broader, shared future-oriented "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) and imaginaries.

Recognition of the potential presence of the virus has affected the way many people behave in public space. And, although attitudes and uptake towards these changes are far from uniform (Office for National Statistics 2021), even those who have not necessarily changed their practices must share public space with those who have. Accepted bodily comportment, projected lines of flight and the attendant affective atmospheres of supermarkets, public transport, bars, and restaurants have changed. This is a result of both the designed modification of spatial infrastructures and a shared acknowledgement, both affective and cognitive, of the potential presence of the virus. Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts are helpful in mapping out this first dimension of lived, practical futurity which I assert the pandemic has altered. As Lisa Adkins (2009: 1) observes, reflecting on Bourdieu's work, "practical action will always concern futurity". The two Bourdieusian concepts which create space for further examination of the way Covid-19 has affected our lived, practical futurity are 'habitus' and 'doxa'. The first, habitus, represents "the system of dispositions [individuals] have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition" (Wacquant 1989: 40). This is an embodied mode of being-in-the-world which is both conditioned by and constitutive of broader social structures (Bourdieu, 1977). 'Doxa', relatedly, pertains to the received forms of common-sense associated with the habitus of individual, doxic actions, appearing self-evident to individuals in the processual moment of lived practice (Bourdieu 1977).

By thinking about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on future-oriented aspects of habitus and associated doxa we acknowledge the extent to which our lives are future-oriented in processes of embodied, quotidian practical action. Returning to the examples set out above we can consider changes to how we anticipate our and others' movement in and through public space. Previous modes of embodied practical behaviour now necessarily mesh with calculations around the likelihood of

potential contagion in different timespaces and attendant atmospheres and emotions of anxiety (or a lack thereof) and normative judgment about good or bad epidemiological practice. Furthermore, doxic behaviours, what is or is not done without thinking, in daily practical activity have shifted to various degrees in line with social acceptability associated with good hygiene, mask-wearing and social distancing. For example, through an embodied response to a potential sneeze, foregoing handshakes or the utilisation of hand-sanitiser before entering a supermarket. These alterations to habitus and doxa mushroom into broader tapestries of Covid-mediated strategies for social life around travel, the workplace, and seeing friends or relatives. The planning of these becomes imbued with additional dimensions of Covid-derived complexity according to individuals' various permutations of personal, normative, and legal acceptability and comfort. Disparities both between people's outlook and between people's pandemic habitus and 'the rules' have been creating anxieties since prior to the first lockdown. As such, impacts on habitus, as is to be expected, are further mediated, and complicated along individual circumstantial lines. Ultimately, many people's tactics and strategies, both reflexive and embodied, for materialising quotidian futures in practice now account for the spectral presence of Covid-19 in daily life.

Optimism after Covid-19

How then might these changes to our lived futurities articulate with how we imagine futures for ourselves and society? For Lauren Berlant (2006: 23), "cruel optimism" "names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility". Berlant's work addresses the gnawing, insidious effects of desire in a world tinged with traces of foreclosed potential and possibilities. The residual traces of the meliorism and the patchwork emancipations of the twentieth century haunt the imaginaries of the twenty-first. Yet the pandemic reminds us that that which roots the desires animating our imagined futures – the fundamental syntax of envisioned 'good lives' – is contingent. And, further, that its contingency is political-ecological. At an initial level, this contingency is highlighted by the way the pandemic has further underlined how health inequalities mediate what sort of lives people can look forward to or anticipate living. In this sense, the spectre of the virus and its future potential will have an impact on the way people look forward in their lives, assess risks and internalise norms in ways reminiscent of existing discourses of 'healthy ageing'. As such, in the UK at least, I argue that the presence of Covid-19 will exacerbate the permeation of healthcare discourses and practice by a form of neoliberal governmentality which individualises responsibility for being 'healthy' (Rose et al. 2006). A paradigm which is, in turn, associated with future-oriented 'technologies of the self' oriented towards honing a future, healthier self (Foucault 1990).

However, I also wish to connect the pandemic's futurity to a broader structural issue related to the idea of "cruel optimism": the political-ecological mediation of future-oriented structures of feeling by the environmental and ecological crises of the Capitalocene. That the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2013) which saturates orthodox imaginaries of a good life is predicated upon an extractive relationship with the 'web of life' (Moore 2015) is not a controversial point. Indeed, during recent summers it is likely many Californians or Australians may have begun to reimagine or reconsider the futures they previously envisioned for themselves whilst looking up at skies illuminated by wildfires. Yet, I argue the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, beyond spatially demarcated events like fires or floods, the extent to which a cruel optimism infects people's hopes for a twenty-first century that will only be characterised by further crises. Moving beyond the work of Berlant, this is a cruel optimism dictated by compromised conditions of both political and ecological possibility. These are, of course, conditions of possibility currently afforded only to a sliver of the earth's population in the Global North. For everyone else, the cruel optimism of desire and aspiration has never lost its political ecological dimension. Fundamentally, the extent to which this subset of the world's people clings on to their aspirations for the indefinite and hereditary continuation of the imperial mode of living will

determine the gravity of the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) that continues to be meted out to those in the majority who have done the least to create these problems.

Whether or not Covid-19 will mediate popular expectations for what a lifetime of prosperity in the Global North will look like remains to be seen. Current indications, however, are not promising. Eco-modernist and green capitalist visionaries (White and Roberts 2020: 231-233) will be buoyed by the initial piecemeal success of the vaccine techno-fix as an exercise in re-emptying the future (cf. Adam and Groves 2007). But, as questions around vaccine distribution show, theirs are visions of the future rooted in deepening global inequalities, violent extraction, and unrelenting imperialism. Yet, as the pandemic also reveals, the imperialist structures maintained over recent centuries to ensure the relative prosperity of the Global North will only offer uneven insulation against the realities of the Capitalocene.

Political Futurities

These predictions and assessments must be linked to a critique that seeks to highlight how futures are constructed, disseminated, and enacted through and around the state. Through the interplay between the rhythms of viral latency, infection and contagion and the timescales of vaccination programmes, mandatory quarantine, sick pay, and social distancing regulations, we encounter the contested political ecological temporalities of the Covid-19 pandemic. These, in turn, intersect with the lived futurities discussed above, mediating, dictating, and relating to possible and desirable futures through public discourses of epidemiology and economics, as well as the material and institutional social processes of health and social care. Each of these tensions and temporalities raises separate questions about the attendant social futurities they engender. But, given the brevity of this essay, this section concerns itself particularly with an idea that has been of particular recent interest for social scientists: anticipation.

Ben Anderson’s work (2010) has come to epitomise geographical approaches towards anticipation and anticipatory action as central tenets of contemporary liberal techniques of governance. For Anderson, configurations of different ‘styles’, ‘practices’ and ‘logics’ make the future an object of governance in the present. These are, in turn, predicated upon an understanding and reification of the future as open and defined by contingency and risk. The United Kingdom’s response to the pandemic in early 2020, however, seemed to represent a relative failure of all three of Anderson’s pillars of anticipatory action: ‘preemption’, ‘precaution’ and ‘preparedness’. This is exemplified by the fact that an anticipatory ‘war-game’ of the UK’s pandemic readiness in 2016 called ‘Exercise Cygnus’ had already concluded that “the UK’s preparedness and response, in terms of its plans, policies and capability” was “not sufficient to cope with the extreme demands of a severe pandemic” (Public Health England 2017: 6). Further, epidemiological modelling was clearly deemed an insufficient basis for pre-emptive governmental intervention on more than one occasion in 2020. As, for example, when exponential rises in infections were ignored in that year’s autumnal viral surge (Landler 2020). Such practices are typical ways, for Anderson (2010: 787), of ‘calculating’ and ‘performing’ futures respectively. So, why is it that throughout the pandemic there has been a consistent dearth of seemingly future-oriented governance?

The answer lies in emphasising the Foucauldian dimensions of Anderson’s work and supplementing them with further theory about the way the state forms and modulates space-times and futurities. Firstly, the typologies of ‘anticipatory action’ Anderson sets out describes techniques of making the future present. But the schematics of biopolitical valuation inherent to late capitalist governance determine where and when action should be taken utilising the results of future-oriented knowledge practices. The biopolitical tendencies of the United Kingdom’s governmental apparatus in 2020 must be understood in the context of austerity, the underlying rubric of the Conservative government’s

political imaginary since 2010. As Stanley (2016) has forwarded, the discourses and practices of austerity in turn offer their own futurity: against the pre-emptive precaution of preserving life in the face of a potential pandemic, the anticipatory logic of austerity governance was instead oriented towards a horizon of fiscal discipline, suppressed public spending and imagined threats to market credibility.

This can be understood as indicative of the broader future-orientation of UK governance over recent decades. Accordingly, approaches concerned with anticipation and precaution as strategies of governance must acknowledge articulation with the hegemonic consolidation of the state by elites under late capitalism and the impacts pursuant strategies of ensuring ongoing accumulation in the face of crisis have on spatio-temporalities (e.g. Harvey 1989). Fiscal austerity can be seen as exemplary of the sort of future-oriented governance predicated upon, and facilitating the dynamics of, an 'empty' and 'open' future (Adam & Groves 2007). This is a more explicitly Marxian presentation of arguments made by Barbara Adam & Chris Groves (2007), for whom contemporary liberal governance relies on, and is generative of, a modernist spacetime that constructs the future as 'empty' and 'colonisable' via knowledge practices such as economic modelling or legislation. It is not, however, so simple as a uniform state acting to create a singularly 'empty' future. The Covid-19 pandemic has foregrounded future-oriented knowledge practices and associated public discourse aimed at mediating political, epidemiological, and economic uncertainty. This has revealed tensions within the governing apparatus between, for example, epidemiological modelling and economic forecasting, each relying on different anticipatory techniques, discourses, and institutions, each with their own internally diverse spatio-temporalities and futurities.

This heterogeneity and contestation within the state apparatus reminds us to consider the state as a 'social relation' (Jessop 2016), rather than as a monolithic 'future-maker' and 'future-taker' (Adam and Groves 2007). This reality has been brought to the fore within the future-politics of Covid-19 governance. This is exemplified, for example, by the jostling between scientific advisory groups, ministerial departments, parliamentarians, and corporate lobby groups around policy areas such as international travel restrictions. It is also necessary to reinsert an ecological dimension to this political geographical point. Theorisations of the state remain plural in political ecology, however a focus on the Covid-19 pandemic and its futurity can offer an entry point for an examination of contested, future-oriented socio-ecological knowledges within the state apparatus, which are productive of and produced by the lived social realities of the abovementioned viral temporalities. The significance of these 'moments of contestation' (Whitehead 2007: 58) remains salient, not least given the outstanding questions of vaccine production and distribution and future mutations to the Covid-19 virus itself.

Mutations and Conclusions

The above reflections examine pandemic futurity in several directions. The pandemic has prompted a non-anthropocentric revisioning of the future down to the level of the quotidian. I have also explored the complexities and power relations which determine how the future is forecasted and governed at the level of the state before and during the pandemic. If we are to forge liveable and equitable global futures in the Capitalocene, we must work towards subjective and institutional change at both articulated levels. Whilst undertaking this work we must recognise that Covid-19 has diverse futures amongst us, and these futures will be co-produced by both the immune systems of individuals and the unequal social worlds which they occupy. The pandemic thus precludes and demands new relations of care, within our neighbourhoods as mutual aid and internationally in the forms of the equal distribution of vaccines and the waiving of punitive intellectual property regimes.

In this direction, Adam and Groves (2007) call for a re-evaluation of our relationship with the future which seems appropriate, recognising it as 'lively' in a sense that more-than-human forces have ontological futurities entangled with ours. This is linked to a long running thread in Barbara Adam's work (1998) – namely a recognition that the future is not 'empty' and quantifiable but is in fact ontologically latent, emergent and more-than-human. We can think here, for example, of Covid-19's genetic constitution as a site of emergence, with future viral mutations latent within its ever evolving, mutating and intentional composition. Adam and Groves' work is also simultaneously a call for an onto-epistemological re-evaluation of the future and an accompanying ethical shift, foregrounding an ethics of care as a principle of a new futurity. This appeal to both materiality and care is mirrored in future-oriented work by scholars like Rachel Loewen Walker (2014), for whom a recognition that socio-ecological processes are "always already entangled in a vital materiality" (Loewen Walker 2014: 56) is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the future's capacity for radical alterity.

However, a political ecological approach reminds us to also attend to the socio-ecological relations and associated power structures which work to determine both what the future will be and the way that the future is understood, represented, and contested in the present. The future is open, but it is a partial aperture. As discussed above, this perspective also reveals fundamental questions about how responses to the crises provoked by the Capitalocene will play out in the coming decades. The Covid-19 pandemic reminds us that these projected pathways will encompass and contend with the emergent, latent, more-than-human futurities of the web of life within which humans metabolise (and are metabolised by) 'nature'. And, through its amplification by and nourishment from existing inequalities, the pandemic also reminds us that the response must address the social relations and materialities that facilitate the potential for a future characterised by worsening environmental, economic, and epidemiological apartheid.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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