

Covid, or the clandestine sacred from “covidism” to “covidosis”...

[Kovidizm”den “kovidoza” kovid ya da kutsal giz...]

[Covid, ou le sacré clandestin du « covidisme » à la « covidose »...]

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Abstract

This article examines the health and social crisis linked to the global Covid-19 pandemic from an anthropological point of view, showing that fundamental categories of analysis from anthropology were mobilized in the reflection which underpinned the writing of this article, such as purity/impurity which constitute fundamental taboos constituting most archaic or contemporary societies and which establish a symbolic line of demarcation between what is socially acceptable and what is not. In this contribution I further endeavor to demonstrate that the sacred character of interactions (which constitute the symbolic cement of the social order according to Erving Goffman) has been desecrated by extremely strict health measures (wearing a mask, social distancing, use compulsory use of hydroalcoholic gel, compulsory and intrusive nature of the health pass, etc.) which have been rightly perceived as an attack on the fundamental freedoms of individuals but more broadly as a violent questioning of our model of society and a certain art of living outside, on terraces and in the streets. I also wish to show that Covid has become a real ideology (Covidism) which has imposed itself insidiously to the point of becoming unavoidable and presiding over our destinies by gradually restricting our room for maneuver and even a neurotic obsession, Covidosis that which can be compared to the obsessional fevers of the Middle Ages and which ended up making the men and women hit hard by this pandemic crisis literally sick in terms of mental health.

Keywords: Covid, covidism, covidose, anthropology, distancing, obsession

Özet

Bu makale, küresel Kovid-19 salgınıyla bağlantılı sağlık ve toplumsal bunalımı, insanbilimsel bir bakış açısıyla incelemekte ve bu makalenin yazılmasına temel oluşturan saflık/safsızlık gibi eski ya da çağdaş toplumların çoğunda temel korkuları oluşturan ve toplumsal olarak kabul edilebilir olanla olmayan arasında simgesel bir sınır çizgisi kuran insanbilimin temel çözümleme ulamlarının harekete geçirildiğini göstermektedir. Bu katkımda ayrıca, (Erving Goffman'a göre toplumsal düzenin simgesel birleştiricisini oluşturan) etkileşimlerin kutsal yönünün, haklı olarak bireylerin temel özgürlüklerine bir saldırı olarak algılanan ancak daha geniş anlamda toplum örneğimizin ve dışarıda, teraslarda ve sokaklarda yaşama sanatının şiddetli bir sorgulaması olarak algılanan son derece katı sağlık önlemleri (maske takma, sosyal mesafe, zorunlu hidroalkolik jel kullanımı, sağlık kartının zorunlu ve müdahaleci doğası, vb.) tarafından kirletildiğini göstermeye çalışmaktayım. Ayrıca Kovid'in gerçek bir ideoloji (Kovidizm) hâline geldiğini, kendisini sinsice dayatarak kaçınılmaz duruma geldiğini ve manevra alanımızı giderek kısıtlayarak kaderimize hükmettiğini ve hatta Orta Çağ'ın saplantılı

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hummalarıyla karşılaştırılabilecek bu salgın bunalımından en çok etkilenen kadın ve erkekleri, ruh sağlığı açısından tam anlamıyla hasta eden sinirsel bir saplantıya, Covidosis (Kovidoz)'e dönüştüğünü göstermek istiyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kovid, kovidizm, kovidoz, insanbilim, mesafe, saplantı

Résumé

Cet article examine la crise sanitaire et sociale liée à la pandémie planétaire de Covid-19 d'un point de vue anthropologique, en montrant que des catégories d'analyse fondamentales de l'anthropologie ont été mobilisées dans la réflexion qui a sous-tendu l'écriture de cet article, telles que la pureté/l'impureté qui constituent des tabous fondamentaux constitutifs de la plupart des sociétés archaïques ou contemporaines et qui établissent une ligne de démarcation symbolique entre ce qui est socialement acceptable et ce qui ne l'est pas. Dans cette contribution je m'attache en outre à démontrer que le caractère sacré des interactions (qui constituent le ciment symbolique de l'ordre social selon Erving Goffman) a été profané par des mesures sanitaires extrêmement strictes (port du masque, distanciation sociale, utilisation obligatoire du gel hydroalcoolique, caractère obligatoire et intrusif du passe sanitaire, etc.) qui ont été perçues à juste titre comme une atteinte aux libertés fondamentales des individus mais plus largement comme une violente remise en question de notre modèle de société et d'un certain art de vivre à l'extérieur, dans les terrasses et dans les rues. Je souhaite montrer aussi que le Covid est devenu une véritable idéologie (le Covidisme) qui s'est imposée insidieusement jusqu'à devenir incontournable et présider à nos destinées en restreignant peu à peu notre marge de manoeuvre et même une obsession névrotique, la Covidose que l'on peut rapprocher des fièvres obsidionales du Moyen-Âge et qui a fini par rendre les hommes et les femmes frappés de plein fouet par cette crise pandémique littéralement malades sur le plan de la santé mentale.

Mots-clés : Covid, covidisme, covidose, anthropologie, distanciation, obsession

1. Introduction

You might think that Covid (understood as a global epidemic sequence) and the sacred would be at odds with each other. And yet, if we look at all this closely, we see many links and similarities.

That's what this article is all about. We'll be talking about rites, cults, and magical thinking, as well as the new system of rituals that is taking the place of old ones that have been suspended and banned as a result of the health crisis.

The question is how Covid has changed our relationship with ourselves, with others and with the world, a relationship that is largely symbolic. The discussion will be broadly anthropological.

2. Mask to the test of the “sacred face”

What does a virus - which we have tried to combat with a gigantic arsenal of health, media, economic and repressive measures - have to do with the sacred sphere, which is invisible, mysterious, powerful, and intimidating? If you think about it, they already share some of the adjectives we have just mentioned.

And against all odds, Covid is reintroducing the sacred into our lives, our relationships, our ways of behaving and living. But it's a clandestine, unsuspected sacredness. And it's all the more effective because it moves forward masked, so to speak.

Of course, we shouldn't confuse the sacred with religion. Religion is simply “the administration of the sacred”, to use Roger Caillois' famous phrase (Caillois, 1939). The sacred is a higher, transcendent power that organizes the world and the destiny of mankind. All eras, all mythologies, all religions give it a particular form, singular supports, and administer it through a set of rites. Importantly, the sacred always demands distance, solemnity, precautions, and respect. Casualness and connivance are forbidden with this force that can sublimate (having “sacred fire” or an “extra soul”) or punish and annihilate (“Heaven fell on his head”).

All rites operate on a grid that separates the sacred from the profane (pro fanum, “before the temple”), and above all, what is pure from what is impure. We know that certain religions pay close attention to the scrupulous observance of “ablutions” (careful washing of the hands and face), to purify oneself before entering places of worship.

Over the past few months, Covid has been encouraging us to re-examine our relationship with others through the prism of pure and impure, good and evil (known as the 'right' moral distance) and, above all, life and death. A sacred prism, but implicitly.

Similarly, we no longer touch each other, we respect distance, we fear being intrepid or reckless by merely touching, with all the consequences that could entail. Christ's *Noli me tangere!* is actualized by the exasperated "Keep your distance".

The 'contactless' society is slowly but surely taking shape. It's not just money that is now 'dirty' (and therefore impure), it's other people who are potentially dangerous. A new sociability is being invented by force of circumstance, in which we can no longer shake hands or embrace. With the sacred, we are never carefree, but always cautious. Unauthorized people are not allowed near the sacred. Above all, it must not be touched. The sacred is that which must not be touched, quite simply because it touches that which we can do nothing about, our presence here on earth, our life, our history, our future. Covid has forced us to take constant precautions with others and the environment. Keep away from people, ventilate, wear masks according to precise rules. The sacred obliges us, it leaves us forbidden. And prohibitions are legion around Covid. The Covid, like the sacred, sees ritual proscriptions added to moral prescriptions.

Let's talk about morality. In recent months, we have been constantly reminded of the charity preached by many religions, and that wearing a mask is first and foremost a way of protecting others from the danger you may be carrying. It's an altruistic gesture that comes under the heading of charity. In public places, the haunting soundtracks are a constant reminder of this.

The sociologist Erving Goffman described these rites of interaction as a way of celebrating the "sacred face" of others (Goffman, 1973a). But other forms of civility are emerging, underpinned by fear, distance and respect - new mantras for relationships.

And then the antibacterial gel. Yves Winkin talks about it in an original way (Winkin, 2020). This magical product, somewhere between a potion and a prayer, is "thaumaturge" (Greek for "that works miracles"). People devoutly smear it on their hands, in a micro-ritual sacrificed at the entrance to public places rather than temples. It's a stoup that doesn't say its name. It imports a sacred gesture into our profane lives, "unwillingly". It purifies, reversing the possible effects of contagion. Many businesses and administrations have a watchman on their doorstep who acts as an officiant, ensuring that procedures are followed and, above all, that this rite of purification is respected. This act of goodwill is the price to pay for social acceptance in a consecrated place.

As for masks, they deprive us of the legibility of other people's faces, adding mystery, strangeness, and disquiet. We can no longer see the smile, which is veiled. As a result, relationships become serious and distant, a bit like a place of worship in the end.

Anthropologically, the confinements could be read as 'liminal' periods, sequences of ritual asceticism enabling a return to social salubrity and healing. These will return at the end of a period of penitence, if we consider confinement as a time of "penance", of deprivation (and already of freedom of movement), of continence...

Finally, Covid and the sacred share a common emotion: fear. Fear of contaminating or being contaminated, and therefore of being punished for one's carelessness, imprudence - or impudence! - and fear of dying. With Covid, there's no better way of putting it. It's a strange combination of the infinitesimal and the infinite, launched to terrify the times and chill the air. Perhaps the 'social body' is being re-sacralized through the thousand covidian precautions, distances, and masks. In any case, in a biblical paradox, no one can simply "wash their hands of it" any more...

3. From covidism to covidosis

Covid is a virus, and much more besides: it has become an ideology, a kind of new religion, and a neurosis too.

The virus has undergone some astonishing variations, which are not just epidemic. So it is with what I call covidism and covidosis. They are gaining ground, contaminating society, affecting relationships, and infecting minds.

Covidism is the ideological and religious dimension of the way in which the virus is 'experienced' mentally and morally by a section of the population. This 'religion' (which is also an ideology, with an assumed political slant) finds its moral purpose in the pursuit of an ideal: health, but precisely biological health. The WHO (World Health Organization) states that "health is a state of general, moral, mental and social well-being". Covidism has no regard for these dimensions: its obsession is with a clean blood count. Millions of depressed, insecure followers? Who cares? Salvation lies elsewhere. To be healthy is almost to be holy, isn't it? And there's only one step from "health" to "sanctity", a step that covidists happily take.

The cardinal virtue of covidism, in its social application, is hygienism. It has its gestures, which must be “good” (like the distance to be respected), and its scrupulous rules of behaviour: “no contact”. We remember Jesus’ “Don’t touch me!” But if by misfortune there is contact with impurity - evil! - there’s the gel, distributed to the faithful by new fonts placed at the entrance to all public places. And then there’s the mask, a sign of recognition that followers wear proudly, stretching from the top of the nose to the chin. Non-believers dare to wear it carelessly, but fortunately they are reminded of the ritual rule.

And the end result of all this would be - will be! - a society free of microbes and viruses. In the meantime, we’re keeping ourselves to ourselves, just as the monks withdrew from the world.

And then there’s covidosis. Covidosis is an obsessive neurosis in which the virus is the focal point, the abscess of fixation. Because the axiom is valid, according to which “covidising society co-divides the social”. Never have there been so many clashes, disputes and clashes (in the family, at work, in public places, etc.) as there have been since Covid entered our lives. And indeed, the virus has made us compulsive, obsessive, neurotic and aggressive. Constantly washing your hands, purifying everything, airing everything, running away from germs, from the virus, at all costs. And persuade the deviants to fall in line...

There is even a psychotic side to covidosis, when our relationship with reality is altered by an entirely covidised grid of perception, and our whole life is governed by what we should and shouldn’t do, touch and don’t touch, and so on. Some people, seized by what used to be called “obsidial fevers”, no longer go out, voluntarily confined, reclusive like hermit crabs, believing that everything has become impure and dangerous. Covidosis is obsessive, because it is a grid of perception that makes people even more paranoid than suspicious. And aggressive, because if others are negligent or even dangerous, they must be reminded at all costs to see reason, and the black sheep must be brought back into the flock, but not before it has agreed to make amends. Devotees of covidism stricken with covidosis are sure they embody Goodness. You can’t go wrong with them; in that sense, they are embracing the zeitgeist. But beware, covidists of all stripes: “revelation” is not far off, historically, and phonetically, from “revolution”. And beware of backlash. Those who light the pyres today may be on them tomorrow...

4. Confinement, a “symbolic disfigurement”

The ordeal of confinement and the suspicious distancing of others have reminded us by default of the fundamental role played by rites and courtesies in our relationships and in society.

The emergence of Covid19 has triggered a major crisis, with implications for all sectors of society - business, the economy, education and so on. But it is also shaking up the most innocuous aspects of our lives. So, it is with the disruption to relationships caused by confinement, and more generally by the precautions required by the highly contagious nature of the virus. Quite apart from any health considerations, we can say that the arsenal of precautions needed to curb the epidemic is what we might call a “symbolic disfigurement”.

Our day-to-day relationships, our relationship with our social circles, our ties with our communities of destiny (family, friends, professional...) are heavily impacted by this confinement. These relationships, communities and institutions are clothed in a fine symbolic mesh. But invisible and imperceptible, we forget it when everything is going well! Yet our lives are punctuated by symbolic activities such as pleasantries, rites of greeting and interaction, and festive occasions organized to meet up, celebrate, commemorate, and pay tribute. In fact, we spend our time passing through rites and sacrificing ourselves to ceremonial practices, without even being aware of it. Rites sacralizes relationships and communities. But this “architecture of the social” is now hindered, prevented, forbidden. There is indeed a “symbolic disfigurement” in this impossibility and even prohibition of approaching others, in this injunction to be wary of them, on pain of sanctions, epidemic and criminal! We come back to this: greeting each other, shaking hands, kissing, spending a convivial moment with friends and family (toasting!), honoring members of a community, all contribute to the creation of society.

At its most elementary level of producing links, at its most symbolic level of recognizing others as important in our eyes and in the eyes of the collective. Erving Goffman based his work on an analysis of the fundamental function of interaction rites, which enable each person to know his or her place and to recognize that of others (Goffman, 1973b). Politeness, courtesy, hierarchy, gallantry (a dirty word?) are expressed and graded by the range of courtesies that express them and give them meaning.

As an aside, the crisis of incivility is much more serious than it seems (cf. Sartre’s hackneyed quote, “rituals must be established between men, otherwise they will kill each other”). Yet we are now hindered in the spontaneous expression of this relational grammar and social syntax. Worse still, the handshake (which originally consisted of showing that you didn’t have a white weapon hidden in your hand!) is banned precisely

because an invisible weapon may be hidden there: the virus! As for gatherings, which seal friendships, social relations, neighborhood, professional and family relationships, these are still banned.

In short, confinement forces us into a form of “reclusion”, it “snails” us and puts others at a distance, while definitively enshrining the society of “connected individualism”. Of course, we cannot be purely deplorable: new social networks are appearing online, and new rituals are emerging, such as these concerts of applause in the windows to salute the courage and self-sacrifice of carers. The fact remains, however, that confinement also ushers in a new “age of suspicion” with regard to others (and even those close to us), while suspiciously re-examining their presence, or even a promiscuity that has become unbearable. And when proximity becomes inappropriate, the collateral damage is a low-key “relational narcissistic wound”. It's against the grain that we ask everyone to keep their distance.

5. Rites script, dramatize and aestheticize relationships

Rites, which are intangible symbolic forms, place their formidable action under the auspices of three principles: they script, they aestheticize, and they dramatize social relations. They script because they explain how things are supposed to happen, according to a pre-established script (cf. the little ballet that is “danced” when several people have to go through a door). They are aesthetically pleasing because they are a showcase for relationships. Finally, they dramatize, because they say that the moment being experienced is a special and even unique moment (thesis defense, wedding, presentation of decorations, but also funerals).

Let's talk about funerals. The ban on attending the last moments of one's loved ones, and then their funeral, is “monstrous”, morally and psychologically. Generations of anthropologists have described and analyzed the thousand conjuratory precautions and ostentatious dramaturgy (cf. the “mourners” of certain cultures) surrounding funerals. Preventing and forbidding the “communion of farewells” forces people to die in distress, reclusive, rejected for the sick. And prohibiting loved ones from accompanying the deceased to his or her “final resting place” (whether in the ground or in ashes) prevents them from mourning and mourning with dignity, because it makes it symbolically and psychologically impossible for family and friends to accept the bereavement and, precisely, to be able to dramatize and aestheticize such a painful moment.

Yet one of the functions of rites is precisely to control the anxieties linked to major moments of change, separation, rupture and loss; to control these existential anxieties while providing them with a framework and even an aesthetic. “Necessity is the law”, of course, but the question of funerals in Covid times¹⁹ needs to be reconsidered, because it will leave deep scars on loved ones and, more broadly, on society. We are of course thinking of the character of Antigone, who was walled up because she wanted to pay her brother Polynices a funeral tribute, whatever the cost.

As Régis Debray so eloquently put it, “a we is united by an act, deliberate or not, of sacralization” (Debray, 2009, p. 19). It is the “place of links”, where we recognize, belong, celebrate and commemorate. Ritual is a source of positive energy; it circulates emotions and gives them a direction; it regenerates and “orients”. The sacred permeates the social, and rites are originally religious in essence. But there is no dogmatism: according to me communities celebrate themselves by celebrating their gods. This is a way of reaffirming the pre-eminence of rites as original, primordial symbolic forms.

6. Conclusion

In families and couples, in businesses and institutions, the end of the year will herald the return of cathartic rituals, a return to life and back to life. These moments will remind us that we are beings “of flesh and sense”, and that confinement will also have deprived us of a symbolic but also sensory relationship with our loved ones. May we then become one again, to reverse the prevailing individualism and the current mutilating distance imposed. What is certain is that the ritual expression “take care of yourself” will have taken on a whole new meaning!

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