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NIKOLAOS OLMA

Looking into the past, living in the future

What does gazing up at the night sky have in common with the COVID-19 pandemic? Even though no matter can travel faster than light, the speed of the latter is constant and finite, and hence when we look at the night sky, we see stars and galaxies in the way they were in the past, for the starlight that we see at any given point in time travelled for years before it reached us. This phenomenon offers an apt analogy to the challenges that we are faced with today, when, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we attempt to understand the gravity of the situation and to plan our responses to it by relying on the available numbers of confirmed cases and deaths linked to the virus. Putting aside the fact that only a fraction of all cases is officially registered, this data, just like stars, is not indicative of the situation in the present, but rather offers a glimpse into the past.

This is because of the significant time that is needed to establish whether an individual has indeed been infected with COVID-19. The incubation period for the virus ranges between three and 14 days, with an average of five days, which means that symptoms – among patients who are not asymptomatic – appear three to 14 days after exposure to the virus. Even if a potentially infected individual contacts the authorities and registers as such on the same day, it might take another day or two before they are tested for COVID-19 – provided that they have access to such tests – and anywhere between one and 14 days before the results are returned. If we add to those numbers the fact that each carrier can infect two or three others, it becomes evident that the

data we are presented with on any given day reflects the situation as it was anywhere between six and 34 days earlier.

Hence, for those of us under self-isolation or enforced lockdown, the experience of the present becomes largely replaced by our synchronous dwelling in the past and the future. Not only do we largely familiarise ourselves with the spread of the virus by means of several-day-old data that gives us a dated impression of how serious the situation is, but we also orient our lives towards the future, namely the day that we will be free to roam the streets again. Yet, the arrival of this day is contingent on statistical models that take into account past experiences and data, which is very telling of the fact that the policies that states implement in an attempt to control the pandemic are themselves future-oriented endeavours constructed in the past. It will be only when the number of new cases reaches and stays at or close to zero that the lives of those of us who have managed to escape the virus and who – crucially – do not work in the health sector, where every hour matters, will be repositioned in the present.

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COVID-19 testing and the Soviet biowarfare project

One of the reasons COVID-19 caught the world by surprise is that biowarfare has been long outlawed and biological security has been seen as much less of an issue than, for example, anti-terrorist security. In the wake of the epidemic in Russia, its only COVID-19 testing laboratory was ‘Vector’, near the Siberian city of Novosibirsk. It was created in 1974 as part of a secret Soviet biowarfare project, a couple years after, and in violation of, the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972, which the Soviet Union had signed. The history of this laboratory draws attention, first, to the histories of secrecy that affect the biological warfare conspiracy theories that now circulate globally and, second, to un-researched complexities of the political history of science and technology that underpin global biosecurity (or lack thereof) today.

Bio-safety level-4 laboratories awe the public. There are only 50 such laboratories in the world, working with deadly pathogens in an atmosphere of secrecy. The beginning of the current pandemic was accompanied by a ‘theory’ about Wuhan Institute of Virology as a disease source. We don’t know if Wuhan Institute conducts the secret