

# DISRUPTION OF HABITS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Edited by  
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CORINNA GUERRA, MARCO PIAZZA  
INTRODUCTION

1. *February 2020: the global disruption*

A leading characteristic of any pandemic is that its history is expressed in numbers.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this book is precisely to analyse the 2019 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic beyond its numbers.

Rather, the authors focus on the impact of the pandemic on people's habits, ranging from the individual to the social. That our ways of navigating daily life and surviving in this world were so profoundly disrupted by the pandemic has proved to be a truly stimulating research topic for philosophers and historians.

The chronicle of past pandemics is rich in testimonies on the drama of the abandonment of habits and rituals that mark the daily life of individuals and their communities. For example, one of the rituals that in normal times, in every age, is part of the social customs is that connected to the death of a relative or a family member. Throughout the plague epidemics that devastated Europe between 1348 and 1720, one of the most destabilizing circumstances was the impossibility of burying the dead according to religious rites. Death became so indecent, so desacralized, so anonymous and repulsive, that it plunged entire populations into despair until they risked madness; suddenly they had been deprived of the spiritual practices that in grief provide dignity, security and identity to individuals. In the chronicles one finds evidence of the joy of the inhabitants of Marseilles, when, at the end of the epidemic of 1720, they saw the funeral carriages reappear in the streets, a sign that the dead were again being buried according to common rites.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See the chapter by David Vincent in this book. This paragraph is a joint work of Corinna Guerra and Marco Piazza. Paragraph 2 is attributed to Marco Piazza and paragraph 3 to Corinna Guerra.

2 Charles Carrière, Marcel Courdurie, and Ferréol Rebuffat, *Marseille, ville morte: la peste de 1720* (Marseille: M. Garçon, 1968), p. 124.

Italians will recall watching the events of Bergamo from their televisions: the horrific parade of military trucks carrying the coffins of the dead far outside the city because there was no more space in its mortuaries or cemeteries, preventing family members from any form of recollection on the coffins of their dead relatives and from celebrating funerals. As with the current pandemic, the overturning of habits was total: productive activities stopped, the cities fell in silence, the sick were isolated and came to find themselves in complete solitude, death was shrouded in anonymity, and collective rites were abolished, both those of joy and amusement and those of prayer and pain.

This abrupt and brutal suspension of habits, both then and now, was accompanied by an almost total impossibility to formulate plans for the future. In times of crisis, therefore, there is a crisis in the perception of time: the epidemic obliges us to consider every minute as a simple delay and to have no other perspective in front of us than that of probable, imminent death. As Jean Delumeau, author of a masterly history of fear in the West, stresses, “by disrupting common structures and preventing any project for the future”, the pandemic “in this way disrupted doubly the psychic foundations both individual and collective”.<sup>3</sup>

Since World War II, much of the world has entered in *the age of anxiety*<sup>4</sup>, a recurring element in public discourse and private life spread by processes of globalization. Many writers and historians have focused this prevalent approach to life since at least the twentieth century, but a debate has been rekindled following the terrorist attacks of the 2000s.

In France in particular, after the Bataclan massacre of November 13th, 2015, scholars began to consider whether, to quote a verse from the immortal poet Wystan H. Auden, “Then back they come, the fears we fear”.<sup>5</sup> No epoch is without fear, but such global events unleash a sort of collective fear linked with incertitude, or anxiety. In many ways, terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic feed the same kind of anxiety: one

3 Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident (XIVe-XVIIIe siècles). Une cité assiégée* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), p. 130.

4 Wystan H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948).

5 Guerra is very grateful to Jean-Jacques Courtine for letting her read the unpublished text of his conference *La peur à l'âge de l'anxiété, histoire d'une émotion contemporaine* given in Lausanne, October 20th, 2017, at the Dorigny University Campus, to which many of the following considerations belong to. Jean-Jacques Courtine, Alain Corbin, Georges Vigarello, *Histoire des émotions. De la fin du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), vol. 3, ch. on Anxiety. Auden, p. 24. William G. Naghy and Penny Roberts, *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

linked with social life, with activities that we share with other human beings. More importantly, these events disrupt our habits as individuals and as groups. This is not to say that in the past people did not have anxiety; indeed, they feared famines and epidemics, but such events were limited within a perimeter or territory. Instead, anxiety is now linked to a globalized world: global fear, individual anxiety. Anyone could testify that anxiety grew over SARS-CoV-2 due to the highly interconnected world we live in. We now face a future of pandemic, just as 20 years ago we learned to face a future of terrorist attacks. In this context, fear itself seems to be a habit.

However, putting aside similarities, one major difference remains, and it is connected with the limitations of our individual freedom, but all of these points will be discussed in the following book chapters.

These are only some of the issues that we kept in mind when looking for scholars to involve in the webinar *Fear and Disruption of habits during the global pandemic*, which is at the origin of this volume, and we wish that the contributions and resulting discussions will produce an historical and philosophical gaze on what we are experiencing, and a better grasp on our future.

## 2. *Disruption of habits*

Western philosophy has involved itself since Aristotle in the explanation of the formation of habits and customs, and over the centuries has proposed a series of models to explain them by first dialoguing with medical knowledge and more recently with anthropology, psychology and sociology.<sup>6</sup> Around the mid-nineteenth century, one of the greatest scholars of habit, Félix Ravaisson, in describing the un-reflexive spontaneity that marks habits in the sphere of sensations and emotions, wrote of a need and a desire that settles within us without our realizing it.<sup>7</sup> Other philosophers, like Maine de Biran and the novelist Marcel Proust, also dwelled on this

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6 Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson (eds.), *A History of Habit. From Aristotle to Bourdieu* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013); Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London: Routledge, 2014); Marco Piazza, *Creature dell'abitudine. Abito, costume, seconda natura da Aristotele alle scienze cognitive* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018).

7 Félix Ravaisson, *De l'habitude* (Paris: Fournier, 1838), transl. by Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair, *Of Habit* (London: Continuum, 2008).

sense of addiction generated by habit.<sup>8</sup> They show that the feeling reveals itself when a habit is interrupted in a sudden and traumatic way; a kind of interruption that causes pain and anguish. It is at this point that we realize, Proust says, how the habit is a “divinité redoutable” (*dread deity*), and not just a “aménageuse habile” (*skilful arranger*) that helps us adjust to a new environment.<sup>9</sup> An example produced by Proust is that of the trauma that occurs when a loved one abandons us without notice, whether because he flees or because he dies; despite the passion we felt, it had been blunted by habituation, and the abrupt interruption of the ménage produces a very strong pain and a feeling of total disorientation.<sup>10</sup>

In the preparatory work for the Webinar at the origin of this book, we wondered if Western philosophy had tried to reflect on this device of the interruption of habit not only from the point of view of the individual and his passions, but also on a social scale and in relation to collective events. We know that since Plato there has been a conservative line of thought that warns us against the subversion of customs, traditions, and laws.<sup>11</sup> Along this same line, but many centuries later, we see Montaigne, Charron, and Pascal, and we can still find traces of this thought in the work of William James.<sup>12</sup> However, any deep reflection on the traumatic effects caused by the sudden interruption of our social habits is difficult to find before the development of social psychology and sociology at the turn of the twentieth century. There are traces in the work of French philosopher Léon Dumont (often ignored but much appreciated by the already mentioned William James).<sup>13</sup>

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8 Maine de Biran, *Mémoires sur l'influence de l'habitude*, ed. by Gilbert Romeyer-Dherbey, in *Oeuvres, II*, ed. by François Azouvi (Paris: Vrin, 1987); Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-1989), vol. I, p. 17, trans. by Charles K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by Dennis J. Enright, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols (New York: The Modern Library, 1992-1993), I, p. 15.

9 Erika Fülop, ‘Habit in “À la recherche du temps perdu”’, *French Studies*, 68(3) (2014), 344-58; Marco Piazza, ‘Proust, philosophe de l’habitude’, *Revue d'études proustiennes*, 5 (2017), 361-76.

10 Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. III, pp. 772-73, engl. trans., V, pp. 477-78.

11 Plato, *Leg.* 798d.

12 On Montaigne, Charron, and Pascal see: Marco Piazza, *L'antagonista necessario. La filosofia francese dell'abitudine da Montaigne a Deleuze* (Milan: Mimesis, 2015). On James see directly: William James, ‘The Laws of Habit’, *Popular Science Monthly*, 30 (1887), 433-51, repr. with modifications in: *Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols (New York: Holt, 1890, vol. I, pp. 104-27).

13 On Dumont's life and works see: Alexander Büchner, *Un philosophe amateur. Essai biographique sur Léon Dumont (1837-1877), avec extraits de sa*



Dumont, who in 1876 provided a materialistic interpretation of habit, interprets the history of societies in an evolutionary framework, showing how a traumatic social event tends to be followed by a restoration of past collective habits because old habits retain power for a long time after they are abruptly interrupted.<sup>14</sup> This is demonstrated in history by the restoration of previous political orders following revolutions, and obviously Dumont has here in mind the Restoration that followed the French Revolution of 1789.<sup>15</sup> Another trace can be found in a January 1914 lecture given by one of the fathers of modern sociology, Émile Durkheim. Reflecting on Dewey's pragmatism, Durkheim notes that in the interruption of mechanical habit, reflection takes control again of our acting in a condition of "uncertainty, tension, anxiety".<sup>16</sup> Our efforts in such a situation are all focused on "re-establish[ing] the lost equilibrium", showing how our reflexive activity is therefore not merely 'speculative' but 'primarily practical'.<sup>17</sup>

But what happens when we can't restore the destroyed balance? Generally, thinkers like Dumont or Durkheim argue that we will try to re-establish equilibrium, and that our neuronal and organic plasticity allows us to adapt to the new environment, so much that those who succeed most effectively in this enterprise have the upper hand from an evolutionary point of view. In some cases, however, the spectre of an impossible restoration of broken equilibrium appears, with the consequent disintegration of the living organism, and its death.<sup>18</sup>

But no one seems to draw on the long history of pandemics or other natural disasters to try to test his theories. The epidemics, especially those of cholera that mark the nineteenth century, left a trace in social psychology on the question of the contagiousness of fear among the masses. In the case of epidemic diseases, for centuries it was believed that the effects of fear

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*correspondence* (Paris: Alcan, 1884). On Dumont's theory of habit see: Catherine Dromelet, 'Léon Dumont, Sensibilité, plaisir et habitude', *Revue philosophique*, 4, t. 143 (2018), 479-94; Catherine Dromelet, 'Une science de la sensibilité. Dumont, l'habitude et le plaisir', in L. Dumont, *De l'habitude et du plaisir*, ed. by Catherine Dromelet (Paris: Garnier, 2019), pp. 7-24.

14 Léon Dumont, 'L'Habitude', *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 1 (1876), 321-66.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 363.

16 Émile Durkheim, *Pragmatisme et sociologie. Cours inédit prononcé à la Sorbonne en 1913-14 et restitué par A. Cavillier d'après les notes d'étudiants* (Paris: Vrin, 1955), p. 45, transl. by John C. Whitehouse, *Pragmatism and Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 38.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Dumont, 'L'Habitude', p. 355.

contributed to an increase in the number of patients and deaths.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the viral contagion is associated with an emotional contagion that claims further victims.<sup>20</sup> The roots of this theory go down in the history of medicine, since the time of Paracelsus, who believed that the infected air could not cause the plague alone, but could provoke the disease by combining with the leaven of fear.<sup>21</sup> After all, fear can become a habit itself!<sup>22</sup>

In the long history of the study of pandemics, there is no trace, however, of a link between the two terms of the question, that of fear and that of the interruption of habits. We should thus ask ourselves today what knowledge we need to avoid a situation like that generated by the virus SARS-CoV-2, where fear paralyzes us and prevents us from finding a new equilibrium with our habits. And while we are looking for that knowledge, why not also find a new equilibrium that is even better than the one before it?

### 3. *A way out from disruption*

As already stated, the chapters that follow are the result of the papers and debate that took place in December 2020, still under the pressure to reflect on what was happening to us, to our lives, to our way of being in the world. All the scholars involved in the international webinar and in the writing of this book were asked to give their contribution to this subject of research *in fieri*, on the disruption of habits due to the pandemic that we were still experiencing at the time. It is thus an open book, perhaps one to be continued, but whose contents are nonetheless profoundly rich and human, as we forced ourselves to reason on events and feelings that touched us personally as scholars and as human beings.

Perhaps it remains to be discussed who will take care of the psychological effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as academic research generally focused on people affected by the actual disease caused by the presence of the virus in the body, while a great part of the population was deeply

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19 Frédéric Charbonneau, *Quarantine and Caress*, in Claire L. Carlin (ed. by), *Imagining Contagion in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 124–38, p. 126.

20 Jean Delumeau, p. 131.

21 Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*, 2nd rev. ed. (Basel; New York: Karger, 1982), p. 141.

22 Lars Svendsen, *Frykt* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2007), trans. by John Irons, *A Philosophy of Fear* (London: Raktion Books, 2008), p. 46.

affected on a psychological level without ever developing the disease. Beyond that, many other topics have been illustrated by the authors of this volume that can be read in more than one way, but we outline some peculiar elements that emerged.

As is already known, what we used to think of as our daily routines have been profoundly disrupted since 2020. The responsible factors are the fear of the expanding global pandemic, which became increasingly real and close in a very short amount of time, as well as the measures introduced in attempts to contain it. These measures were imposed without any preliminary debate, leaving us with no margin for negotiation: suddenly we were deprived of our interactions, which were a fundamental part of our habits.

For centuries, philosophers have reflected on the influence of habit on individual human conduct (especially from a moral perspective). Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they refined and arrived at a theory that we call the “double law of habit”.<sup>23</sup> When they addressed the issue of customs, namely collective habits, these philosophers generally emphasized the caution required when it comes to changing them. Indeed, a society is at risk when its longstanding traditions, passed down through generations, are suddenly replaced with new ones; when that happens, the risk is anarchy. And the seeming advantages of such a mutation are almost always surpassed by the drawbacks. In other terms, the social upheaval represented by anarchy can entail political actions of repression or restoration of order of a violence that is equal if not superior to that of any revolutionary transformation.

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23 The so-called “double law of habit” was developed apparently independently in the Anglo-Saxon area by Butler and Hume around the middle of the eighteenth century and then, at the turn of the century, in France by Bichat and Maine de Biran. It then found a mature formulation in Félix Ravaisson’s famous doctoral thesis *Of Habit* (1838) and was taken up by William James at the end of the nineteenth century, who adapted it to the neurophysiology of his time. This is the law according to which habit, through repetition or exercise, weakens our passive sensations, to which we basically become progressively accustomed, while it strengthens our active judgements. At the same time, however, it removes our reactions, whether motor or mental, from the sphere of attention, making them spontaneous or automatic and therefore easier and less tiring, and thus transforming them into inclinations or tendencies that are however endowed with a certain reversibility. See: Marco Piazza, ‘Fasci ambulanti di abitudini’, in William James, *Le leggi dell’abitudine* (1887), italian trans. by Denise Vincenti (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2019), pp. 61–67.

Basically, whether habits are individual or social, they constitute a neatly woven fabric of daily life, and routines keep human beings bound to their roles and social functions. Habits enable society as a whole to function and evolve, inasmuch as each individual operates therein like an oiled gear in a giant engine.

De Matteis opens the discussion stressing the old and new rituals that involve individuals, families, and ordinary citizens during the first lockdown. According to his text, each society must decide how to face the shock of a pandemic and each component of society—adolescents, for instance – must elaborate its own way of reacting. To maintain a certain civil society equilibrium, De Matteis argues, we must take these questions into consideration. This analysis offers us an insight both on the flaws and on the virtuous mechanisms of the Italian social system and of neighbourly relations, for example, which still exist at a private level in certain Italian towns.

Are we sure that all the routines resulting from lifestyles, consumption habits, and ways of thinking directing the development of a given society are actually and necessarily leading us towards something better? And, do they lead any given society in a direction that safeguards its viability?

Podgorny, again referring to society's vital rituals, asks whether fear and uncertainty produce new objects instead of simply paralysing our common rituals. She recounts a strange situation in which eukaryotic organisms are turned into virus survival machines. This virus, which is jumping between the animal species that preceded us and that will outlive us, according to Podgorny, could be an opportunity for innovation.

What happened to habits in past pandemics? Did they ever become opportunities for innovation? To understand the pandemic, we appreciate a sort of dialectic process between history and memory where the point of reference is always the Plague. Guérios investigates the media's habitual recourse to the plague as a reference for every epidemic of the past, as if there had been no other worrying epidemic in between it and COVID-19. Perhaps it depends on the cyclical nature of the plague outbreaks, which would not fade after a few years but would rather run their course periodically in nearly every generation. This recurrent pattern ensured that the plague would not be ignored or forgotten, and it provides us with a coherent and simple narrative, which is a cultural and psychological need during a frightful pandemic. However, reference to the distant past in the occasion of traumatic events appears to be preferred, although it means we must compare habits that were markedly different from ours.

In fact, today, loneliness is very common – so common that it can be widely diagnosed as a modern “epidemic” or “plague”, as quoted by Vincent.

If we pause and reflect on the way we live our days, considering them in minute detail, we are forced to admit, as already highlighted, that our collective habits represent primary points of reference in our lives. In this framework, loneliness is one important characteristic of our society, and it was supposedly becoming more severe throughout the various lockdowns. We obeyed the measures that were supposed to contain the virus but that ultimately affected our mental equilibrium as we were deprived of what makes us human.<sup>24</sup>

Vincent, however, argues that we were not as lonely as first expected: we had far fewer routine activities we could do, which, very interestingly, are often solitary activities.

Among the solitary activities that COVID-19 has certainly brought with it are the digital ones. But it should be recognized, in Petrocelli’s opinion, that the pandemic accelerated those phenomena and processes that were slow to start: the so-called *digital transformation*. COVID-19 has in fact disrupted and digitally rebuilt all aspects of our daily life, from sociality to learning and from consumption to entertainment, causing us some inconveniences but, also and above all, great opportunities. As technology has revealed itself a way out from the crisis, Petrocelli sees an opportunity to encourage societies to invest more in its development. On the other hand, if we consider the fates of the plant and animal species that have gone extinct before us, we can legitimately ask whether our consumption rhythms and pre-pandemic, globalized lifestyles — together with the hole in the ozone layer and other man-made environmental catastrophes linked with technology— were not leading to our downfall?

Nonetheless, in this chapter we find that habits and the disruption of them are very dependent on the technology of the time.

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24 A position in this regard, which deserves our attention, was expressed in a TV show by the art historian Tomaso Montanari. Theatres and museums are what makes us human, he argued, so their prolonged closure constituted a renunciation of being human, with all the psychological discomfort this entails. *Montanari cita Churchill: “Quando gli chiesero di chiudere i teatri disse: Ma allora per che cosa stiamo combattendo?”* He stated “Art is not superfluous at times like these, it allows us to move forward.” February 16th, 2021 <<https://www.la7.it/coffee-break/video/montanari-cita-churchill-quando-gli-chiesero-di-chiudere-i-teatri-disse-ma-allora-per-che-cosa-16-02-2021-365575>> (last access: November 15th, 2021).

The mentioned interactions, real or virtual, used to shape the structure of our days, created the comforting form of our existence. The sudden changes brought about by the pandemic not only tore up our road maps, but vehiculated the feeling that it also violated our freedom of choice. This started a process, as Baggio analyzes in his essay, of incorporating the scientific debate into the political debate, fed by philosophers and intellectuals' reflections on the relationship between political power and individual liberty, and on the role played by the state of emergency in the delicate equilibrium between a free society and a tyrannical one. In this case, the catastrophe would be human, not sanitary.

Then, with Dromelet we explore whether the classic sociologists can be called upon to better understand what happened to our habits linked to rituals, social groups, etc., as personality is deeply involved in the identification with social roles.

Reflecting on identification with social groups, Vincenti pays attention to the natural tendency in human beings to conform to certain collective behaviors, in particular when strong feelings like fear hurt us. Human history is constantly marked by psychological contagions – in the words of Sergi, the 'epidemic psychosis' of groups. They are the powerful drivers of history. This led us to a paradox where, in the era of social distancing and lockdowns, the group seemed to have exerted more influence on the individual than ever. This appears to prove that social isolation does not necessarily mean psychological independence from others.

Individuals' self-psychological integrity is at the centre of the study written by Aiello and Marraffa. Considering the relation between unconscious cognitive processes and self-consciousness, they discuss the social and emotive relationship's role in the construction of the mind.

The disruption of habits weakens the domestic relationship with the world, exposes the frailty of the self, and calls upon it to buffer the disruption as best as it can. In normal conditions, on the other hand, the self-memory system is enough to guarantee biographical continuity to find new habits that make the world familiar again. The COVID-19 pandemic has displayed many social and individual practices of re-domesticating the world and of interpersonal space, as De Matteis also shows. What will be the destiny of the most fragile individuals? As individuals belonging to different groups, they would display different attitudes and patterns of reaction facing crisis as well as different degrees of ontological security, in accordance with their different combinations of defensive endowments.

A combination of different practices seems to be the only exit to the *impasse* of disrupted habits, so Piazza considers plasticity and flexibility

in our habit-building as the answer to this crisis. Plasticity could be appreciated also at a different level, if we consider that the pandemic could transform individual habit into group habit due to fear.

A future of fear is obviously not an optimistic scenario, but many scholars are seeing the possibility that pandemics may become quite recurrent. While this hypothesis suggests a catastrophe for our system of habits, there are populations that are accustomed to living with natural risks who don't need to change their habits every time the event takes place. Guerra illustrates a tentative parallel between living in a red zone of volcanic risk and living in a society where pandemics could be recurrent. These populations have negotiated a set of habits with the particular environment they live in: living close to an active volcano is therefore not so different from living in an epoch where an epidemic is impossible to contain.

If we agree that a transformation of habits is a less traumatic exit to this crisis, of course, we may then consider that this pandemic (like many other catastrophic events that shattered daily life) can teach us to rectify our bad habits, thus enabling us to find a type of collective well-being that would be more sustainable. We can start by redefining our concepts of local and global, or of emergency, but above all, as Bensaude-Vincent stresses, it is vital that we negotiate new habits to live in a more sustainable time. In fact, time is the central point that was hit by the coronavirus crisis of 2019-2021, in the sense of our chronological framework. Crisis, according to the author, is the result of a conflict of temporalities, and consequently challenges the notion of a single universal timeline. Bensaude-Vincent encourages the use of a notion of "timescapes", which considers multiple regimes of temporalities of things we interact with, due to the interdependencies created by technological choices.

New crisis, new time, new habits?

### *Acknowledgments*

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