

Reflecting on the Pandemic

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Introduction

I was one of the lucky ones. During lockdown I was able to stay at home and enjoy the privilege of staying safe. Even before the Greek state's first official announcement regarding the restrictions and measures that needed to be taken in order to slow the spread of the new coronavirus, I was already working from my 'home' office, protecting myself and my loved ones, especially since members of my immediate family were considered to be high-risk patients. This was easy, due to the nature of my profession — I am an architect. Within a few days, the Stay at Home recommendation became mandatory for all citizens, especially since a neighbouring country had been hit so hard by the first wave of the pandemic. The national lockdown imposed by the Greek government lasted almost two months. Restricting public gatherings and social contact seemed the obvious response to the unknown virus and the unforeseeable risks that came along with it. Only at the begging of May it was decided that restrictions could begin to be lifted.



Figures 1 and 2. Lockdown was the longest period of quiet in recorded human history. The centre of Athens as never seen before. Photos by the author, April 2020.

Those of us who were able to stay indoors during that time found this to be a unique experience. Apart from the daily routine that involved cleaning and sanitizing, going out for groceries or to the pharmacist, exercising, and so on, staying at home also meant that everyday life would suddenly lose its pace. One could simply stay at home and enjoy the benefits of being cosy inside, read a book, listen to one's favourite music, even get some extra sleep. It was an unprecedented period of peace and quiet. *Lockdown was indeed the longest period of quiet in recorded human history* (Basu 2020).¹ Suddenly, everything stopped. Suddenly, nothing

¹ Basu (2020) significantly notes, 'Under normal circumstances, the human noise merges with and muffles natural seismic activity. Exactly how much our behaviour affects the levels of background noise has been hard to work out until now. Lockdown presented a unique opportunity for researchers not only to control for human activity but also to hear seismic noise that otherwise gets drowned out.'

happened. Suddenly, there was more time to think about our loved ones, reflect on our lives; reflect on our own existence and how fragile it is.

State of Uncertainty

During lockdown, news coverage — in newspapers and the web — revolved around the coronavirus crisis and what it might bring. The same articles reappeared each day, addressing the very same questions over and over again but offering no specific answers to their readers: What are the symptoms of the coronavirus disease? Can you get Covid-19 twice? Will there be a vaccine for Covid-19? How soon can we expect it? What happens if a coronavirus vaccine is never developed? The incoming information was either contradictory or false.

Gaining scientific knowledge of a new virus is a long process. It requires collecting sufficient empirical data. In this case, there are, for the time being, no reliable scientific results that could help us eliminate the further spread of Covid-19; at the same time, treatment seems to be a farfetched case scenario. All scientific theories on the new virus remain on the verge of scientific hypotheses. This kind of scientific uncertainty generates a feeling of public discomfort and conflict both on the social as well as on the political level.² Policy makers and environmental regulators often look to the scientific community for absolutes and certainty. This, however, is not always possible, which is the case with Covid-19. Since the beginning of the pandemic the official health guidelines presented by the governments have been constantly changing depending on new scientific, economic and social data that came to light. Even so, these guidelines are not always so easy to follow.³

T.P. is an architect living in the centre of Athens. He is also a long-distance runner. His daily schedule was disrupted when essential travel guidelines were imposed during Covid-19 lockdown, forcing him to cease his mountain training. In order to keep up with his daily routine, he and his fellow athletes trespassed on the fenced park in a nearby hill. Although Athens is a densely populated city, during lockdown almost all parks were closed to the public and only a few green areas were left which people could freely access. Nevertheless, once the lockdown was lifted, social gatherings increased dramatically in city squares and outdoor spaces. T.P. pointed out:

‘This is an inconsistency to the previous condition that we experienced [...] There was no point in closing down the few parks remaining. This made things worse for

² Most people think of scientific uncertainty as an absence of knowledge. However, in science, uncertainty is used as a measurement to tell us how well something is known. Scientific uncertainty generally means that there is a range of possible values within which the true value of the measurement lies. See *Scientific Uncertainty*, <https://dosits.org/decision-makers/scientific-uncertainty/>

³ For instance, spatial analysis by Esri UK (2020) has found that most pavements in Britain are less than three metres wide, making it difficult for pedestrians to remain two metres apart and follow government guidelines for social distancing. Using measurements from Ordnance Survey, Esri UK has created a map of all pavement widths, discovering that only 30% of Great Britain’s pavements are at least three metres wide. In the case of Athens, the statistics are much lower.

people who were confined in their homes. It is much more difficult to catch the virus outdoors, as long as people do not gather and maintain social distancing rules. So, what was the point in closing everything down?’

‘Nations cohere and flourish on the belief that their institutions can foresee calamity, arrest its impact and restore stability’ (Kissinger 2020). In western culture we are more or less inclined to associate good governance with the notions of political stability and ideological certainty. Recognizing potential risk and being able to foresee change is essential to politics because it determines how administrations address citizens and set their political agendas. Forecasting is a process also entangled with the latest achievements of science and technology. However, the Covid-19 pandemic did exactly the opposite by generating an instability that engendered public disbelief towards the political apparatus. The coronavirus broke the health care systems in developed countries, ‘reminding’ us that radical change is a fundamental characteristic of life itself and that our true knowledge of the world we live in is extremely limited.



Figure 3. In order to keep up with their daily training athletes access the hill through an opening in the fence. Photo by the author and T.P., May 2020.

Awaiting the Return to Normal

In Samuel Becket’s play *Waiting for Godot*,⁴ Estragon and Vladimir are eagerly waiting for Godot to arrive, but he never does. The play premiered in New York at the John Golden Theater in 1956, startling its audience. While New York intellectuals puzzled over the meaning of

⁴ The play illustrates the absurdity of human existence, only shortly after the second world war that left behind widespread destruction and more than 60 million casualties.

Godot,⁵ in November 1957 the American production was taken to the San Quentin prison. The ‘captive’ audience of San Quentin, inmates sentenced to life, understood the play immediately: Inmates knew well what the waiting game was all about: waiting for the mail, for appeal, for pardons; waiting with nothing happening, doing time. As the inmate reviewer wrote for the San Quentin News (28 November 1957), ‘We are still waiting for Godot and shall continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we’ll call each other names and swear to part for ever — but then there is no place to go.’ (quoted in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 622).

In *Waiting for Godot* literally nothing happens. There is no action taking place, no begging, no middle and no ending. The two main characters of the play repeatedly ask each other:

Estragon: *How do we pass our time?*

Vladimir: *We are waiting for Godot.*

But Godot never shows up and this is disturbing for the audience. Becket’s play triggers emotions such as emptiness, malaise, desolation, uncertainty and angst; feelings quite similar to those experience in a state of physical confinement.

Physical confinement and social distancing during lockdown triggered some of those feelings *while awaiting the return to normal*. However, within a few weeks it became clear that the impact of the pandemic will stay with us for a long time, maybe even for years. In addition, not being able to touch each other altered the ways we communicate and interact and affected us strongly on an emotional level.⁶ Physical distancing becomes almost emotional.

Depending on their home environment and housing situation, each person reacts differently during lockdown, either suffering occasional panic attacks, fearing of becoming sick, fearing for one’s job, fearing financial disaster, fearing death, or spending quality time with loved ones, with oneself, having a holyday.

⁵ God? Happiness? Eternal life? Christian Salvation? The Future by definition never present? (The Faber Companion, Ackerley, Gontarski, 2004: 622).

⁶ Linden significantly says, ‘There are two touch systems. One that gives the “facts” — the location, movement, and strength of a touch — and we call that discriminative touch. But then there’s the emotional touch system. It’s mediated by special sensors called C tactile fibers, and it conveys information much more slowly. It’s vague — in terms of where the touch is happening — but it sends information to a part of the brain called the posterior insula that is crucial for socially-bonding touch. This includes things like a hug from a friend, to the touch you got as a child from your mother, to sexual touch [...] It’s not just a different kind of information that’s conveyed by the same sensors in the skin that allow you to feel a quarter in your pocket. It’s a completely different set of sensors and nerve fibers that wind up in a different part of your brain.’ (cited in Stromberg 2015).



Figure 4. A typical Greek Condominium. During lockdown the balcony becomes vital to households, serving most of us as the safe in-between space to the outside world. Photo by the author, January 2020.

During lockdown one thing became crystal clear: we are not all on the same boat when it comes to a disaster of this scale. Over the past decades public policies have been undermining the Welfare State and its impact on national economies. But during lockdown it became crystal clear that diminishing medical care and public health services could be catastrophic regarding social cohesion.

Soon after restrictions were lifted, many governments attempted to restore their political power and lost credibility. In an attempt to reinstate administrations' political authority, a less than democratic approach has been often followed, from the recent enactment of the Security Law in China, undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and its independent judiciary system,⁷ to the violent police response to the George Floyd incident. In some cases, the socio-political reaction to such an approach has been almost as abrupt and violent as the pandemic. After a period of unprecedented quiet and peace, life is struggling to find its pace. Nonetheless, things will never be the same. Is this a bad thing? Only time will tell.

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⁷ See, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>

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