



PLAGUE, PESTILENCE, PANDEMIC

Keywords for a Cultural Epidemiology
of the Present

I ntemperate times, historically, have sought to salvage the present by redeeming the past. The present, especially the present in crisis, proves too amorphous and consuming. The future remains undefined and ungraspable. The past, then, becomes a default target—a desperate attempt to assuage the intemperance of the times by rehabilitating the past, or an illusion of it. The monumental and invariably iconic nature of the past leaves little recourse outside of iconoclasm for historic reformation, hence, the impulsive targeting of monuments, statues, place names, and sacred cows. Writers from Sophocles to Faulkner have perennially dramatized the fact that the past is never completed, no matter how much it is monumentalized. Nonetheless, those under duress in the crisis of the present, more often than not, fail to grasp the unfinished nature of the past, a past whose inexorable continuity they themselves embody.

The modern search for a lexicon that might be adequate to defining epochs of crisis dates from Raymond Williams' ground breaking work in cultural studies. Originally intended as appendix to his *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (Chatto and Windus 1958), Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* was published nearly two decades later (Croom Helm 1976). Williams was keenly aware that contextual historicization, especially at critical junctures when history itself emerges as an object of contention,

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has been key to historical narrative since the Greek Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 BC) in the fifth-century and his Chinese counterpart, Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 86 BC), in the second century BC. Both considered “founders” of historiography in their respective cultures, they instructed, by example, stressing adherence to observable specificity, what the ancient Greek dubbed “autopsis” (“I have seen”). In times of political crises their example and counsel become critical in the lexicon of cultural diagnosis and historical narrative. The particular nature of the present and its manifest symptoms call for a lexicon beyond received notions and existent vocabulary. The list of keywords presented below are cast for the specific conditions of the current historical moment.

Any redeeming of intemperate times proves an exercise in breakage, as iconoclasm suggests. Salvaging becomes a form of catastrophe re-creation whose objects of catastrophic mayhem are also the very subjects of the past’s embodiment, that is, the very iconoclasts, or catastrophists, themselves. The ensuing destruction invariably proves to be forms of self-destruction, a process that finds its accelerant, or booster, in times of crises such as plagues, epidemics, war, and cataclysm. These are events that are most conducive to the paroxysms of historic flailing for self-redemption from what is perceived as the scourge of the past and its history. It is all done in the name of the future, an undefinable hypothesis that might lie beyond the abyss that is the intemperate present.

The present, suspended over that abyss between a problematic past and an uncertain future, has a sense of its own vulnerability, a sense that exacerbates the anxiety of the moment. Equally anxious are the seemingly spontaneous iconoclastic acts of inspirational fervor such as toppling statues and other monumental symbols, as well as systematic aspirational endeavors such as post-World-War-II Germany’s self-remediation referred to as *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* (“working-off-the-past”). The first two decades of the twenty-first century have proved an inexorable intensification of such anxious predicaments. The threshold into the third decade of the century proves to be a critical breaking point exacerbated by the convergence of viral plague, the pestilence of political corruption, interminable war, and the virulence of global mayhem. The result of this confluence turns the pandemic

of the present into pandemonium. As with other epochs in crisis, then, the historical present is marked by violence, mendacity, and confusion.

PLAGUE AND IMPERIAL IMPLOSION

There are chronic maladies that become acute in a time of epidemics. We have early diagnoses of these conditions in Hippocrates' *Epidemics*, Bk.3, and in Galen's prolific opus, chiefly in his *Methodus Medendi*. Diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis in the 5th-century B.C. practice of Hippocrates and in the practice of his Greco-Roman successor, Galen, six centuries later in 166 AD, are symptom-based. They sought a medical practice founded on the natural-material conditions of the time, rather than on the supernatural and on divine intervention. *Epidemic*, as the etymology of the term avers, is what befalls a people (*epi* "upon" + *demos* "people"). Hippocrates and Galen sought to shift the explanation of what comes upon, or over, a society from the mystery of unknowable causes of supernatural origins. Those explanations invariably fell under the jurisdiction of religion and religious institutions.

Attempts to understand the causes or origin of epidemics have historically run up against the domain of religious authority. This has been true in the case of traditional, "pre-scientific" societies, and, *mutatis mutandis*, continues to be the case in our modern "scientific era." Notable in this regard at the epicenter of the latest pandemic during the Trump administration was the conferral of oversight for the government task force on this latest pandemic to an evangelical fundamentalist Christian, the vice president of the USA, under the aegis of the US president's son-in-law, an adherent to the orthodoxy of his own religious confession. The president himself demonstrated daily his aversion to science and his zealous devotion to the cult of Mammon. All made a point of flouting scientific norms and Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines in their personal lives, professional actions, and governmental policies.

As is the case with life in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Hippocrates and Galen lived in intemperate times. Hippocrates (b. ca. 460 in Cos, d. ca. 370 BC near Thessaly) lived through the Plague of Athens of 430–426 BC that killed one third

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of the population of that city-state. The ravages of the epidemic were not insignificant in the outcome of the Peloponnesian War, with Athens' capitulation to Sparta in 404 BC. Hippocrates' book on epidemiology, *Epidemics*, Book 3, dates from ca. 410 BC and consists of case studies focused on the disease itself rather than on the patient. Hippocrates sought to understand the nature of the disease. His stated aim was to demystify the origin of illness by seeking physical, as opposed to divine causes. In his book on epilepsy, *On the Sacred Disease*, he writes: "Men regard its nature and cause as divine from ignorance and wonder [...]" (Hippocrates).

Claudius Galenus (Greek-Roman, b. 130 AD in Pergamon—d. 210 in Rome) was the personal physician of Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (starting in 169) and of his son and successor Commodus (as of 180). The Antonine Plague, also referred to as the Galen Plague, 166–180 AD, because it was chronicled by Galen in his treatise *Methodus Medendi* [methods of caring/healing/curing], was truly a pandemic that killed an estimated five million people and affected the two major empires at the time: Rome and Han China. Its origin is still a matter of speculation and mutual recrimination. But, like the Plague of Athens in 430 BC that changed the history of that city-state, the second-century AD plague altered the history of Rome and of China.

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic philosopher, wrote his *Meditations* on the basis of daily observations. He noted at one point, with a perspectival acumen centuries ahead of its time, "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth." (Aurelius, "Truth") In our time, that complex epistemological insight becomes perverted into the shrill shibboleth of "fake news," if the perceived reality does not accord with one's own convictions. In Book 9, section 2 of his *Meditations* he gives us a glimpse into the political turmoil he witnessed. There, Marcus Aurelius laments that even the pestilence that plagues the empire is less deadly than the falsehood, corruption, evil behavior, and lack of understanding that he witnesses:

A wiser man's part had been to go away from men without tasting falsehood, hypocrisy, luxury, and pride; a second-best course is to breathe your last filled at least with distaste for these things. Or is it your choice to sit down with wickedness and does not your experience even yet per-

suade you to flee from the plague? For corruption of understanding is much more a plague than such a distemper and change of this enviring atmosphere; for this is a plague to animals, as animate beings, that is a plague to men, as human beings. (Aurelius, *Meditations*)

Marcus Aurelius was destined to endure the political “wickedness” he describes for another decade and a half, until his demise in 180 AD, likely from the plague that was given his name. Like Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400 BC), a victim of the Plague of Athens who survived to chronicle it, Marcus Aurelius sees the pandemic through the double lens of what he terms “the pestilence” itself and the plague of social disintegration and human corruption. Thucydides, considered the “father of scientific history,” had pointed to this duality six centuries earlier, noting the breakdown of law, religious piety, and social order as a correlative of the plague. He sought to apply the Hippocratic method of chronicling physical symptoms and conditions of human nature. He saw attribution of events to divine intervention as expedient and somehow always convenient and timely, as the times required. Significantly, Thucydides’ *History* would be translated into English in 1628 by the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes’ own 1651 opus, *Leviathan*, written during the English Civil War (1642–1651), reprised the prescient blueprint for the demise of democracy and the realization of the nightmare of Thucydides about the future of Athens as a democratic society. The premonition of the Athenian historian and the philosophical prognoses of his English translator resonate with eerie accuracy in the pandemic and pandemonium of the twenty-first century.

Whether in ancient Athens or Rome, as with our own historical present, what is most often obscured or elided is the origin of the plague. When a divine cause was to be sought, the impiety that angered the gods to inflict such disaster upon the city state or empire must have originated with the outsiders and non-believers within the city-state or empire. If the disasters were attributed to natural causes, they must have originated in contamination and contagion from outside the city or the empire. Thus, for the Athenians, it was an Ethiopian plague imported through Egypt and Libya; for the Romans, it was a Chinese plague

imported through the trade across the Indian Ocean. The Chinese, for their part, attributed the pandemic to contagion from Rome.

The legacy of these early medical practitioners skewed the practice of medicine in a salutary way, teaching us to pursue natural explanations for plagues and pandemics. But it has also guaranteed a primacy for the study of symptoms, rather than their causes, especially in times of catastrophic pestilence and epidemics. The science and practice of medicine, even today in what defines itself as the scientific age, continues to be symptom-centered. There are religious, political, and now, more than ever, economic reasons for the predominance of what turns out to be a non-causal epistemology. Despite the claim that Hippocratic practice focused on actual symptoms rather than supernatural dispensation, the study of symptoms continues to trump the investigation of their causes. As an oncologist confessed to me at one point, “there is no money in aetiology.” In a wholly monetized society there is reason to fear for the cause, or causes, and the understanding of their origin. And there could well be certain disincentive for their eradication.

Like Thucydides, Marcus Aurelius perceived the redoubled vicissitudes of the pandemic that struck the Roman empire. He saw the “pestilence” as natural and medical. He considered what he termed “the plague” as symptom of social and political corruption. He considered both dangerously corrosive to human health and to the sanity of the body politic. What is salient in this redoubling of disease are the risks for those who would focus and, per chance, actually divulge, the causes of pestilence and plague. As a Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius clearly understood the risks of aetiology, or the discovery of causes. Thucydides (460–400 BC) had paid dearly, in part, for broaching the origin of the Plague of Athens, what he claimed not to be doing, a retribution clouded by the official reason for his exile—his failure to save Amphipolis from falling during his admiralty. The epidemic coincided with what might be an early version of wars of choice, the Peloponnesian War launched by Athens against Sparta in the second year of the Plague. He had ample time to reflect further on that double predicament of pestilence and politics during his twenty-year exile that ensued. That was when Thucydides wrote the history we have

of that war-plagued era and plague-riddled wars that accelerated the downward spiral of the Athenian city-state. If the nuances of this counterpoint between symptom- and cause-based knowledge sound familiar in our current history of plague, pestilence, and perpetual war, there might well be good reason.

In the course of human history, as in the history of the present, what Marcus Aurelius calls human pestilence proves to be endemic. Medical plagues end up becoming epidemic and, now, more efficiently than ever, given humanity's enhanced mobility, burst into pandemic. And precedent demonstrates, as well, that the distance between epidemiological pandemic and socio-political pandemonium becomes easily traversed. Historically, then, the causes of these conditions have been obfuscated and elided. If the origin of the plague is deemed to be divine intervention, the priestly class has a vested interest in safeguarding itself against any liability by foreclosing on any investigation that might divulge the failure of religious institutions. If the causes are deemed to be natural, the political class obfuscates any understanding of those origins, lest they disclose the failure of governance. The duality of the divine and the natural takes on a third dimension now that human scientific technologies possess the capability to manufacture the elements of epidemic contagion. This is the anthropogenic cause, and the obfuscation of origin or possible cause, understandably, takes on added urgency. In a time of war, especially hybrid warfare that could deploy any conceivable combination of weaponry, including biological and viral agents, any possible scrutiny beyond symptoms broaches a very dangerous domain. The combination of natural and anthropogenic causes of pandemics has a long history, documentable as early as 1346 and the origins of the Bubonic Plague, commonly referred to as the Black Death (Wheelis 2002: 971–975). When human agency is implicated, aetiology is not only an inconvenience but a threat that must be neutralized, preemptively, if possible, by any means. Disclosure and understanding of cause and origin would threaten not only the technical artificers. In a time such as the present, when virology, contaminant and antiviral, operates on an industrial scale, the tracing and exposure of epidemic origins becomes a threat not just to governing institutions, but also alarming to the military

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industrial complex entangled with those institutions, especially in a war-dependent economy.

Under natural and supernatural circumstances and what they might bode, placating the gods that visited the plagues by scapegoating the expendable people within the city-state or empire, or attributing contagion to exogenous infection, as the Athenians, Romans, and Chinese did, now seems like a rather anodyne reflex. In a manufactured pandemic the originators of anthropogenic pestilence would not be likely to find immunity from their own artifice. In their dire predicament they would be likely to seek impunity, or any self-exculpatory means in dealing with what is called blowback. Athens eventually buckled under the weight of its Plague and saw no alternative but to recognize the futility of its hubris in instigating the Peloponnesian War. And Rome rattled on in imminent expectation of the barbarians after the decimation of the second-century pandemic. The prospects at the end of the current pandemic might be no less foreboding. Humanity finds itself, once again, at a transformative juncture in which both elements of the common good are in peril, with the common slipping away from what might be good, and the good becoming progressively less common.

KEYWORDS FOR A SYMPTOMATIC TIME

Here, then, is a list of key terms that correspond to the constellation of maladies concurrent with this latest pandemic and its attendant socio-political pandemonium in the context of the United States of America. In an obvious nod to the American writer and Civil War veteran Ambrose Bierce,¹ this minimal lexicon has been dubbed “Kadir’s Devil’s Medical Dictionary” by my Oregonian neighbor and autodidact classicist Stephen John Cuffel. The incisive Bierce, who took the measure of America from his precarious perch as reporter for William Randolph Hearst’s *The San Francisco Examiner*, disappeared into the fray of Pancho Villa’s Mexican Revolution at the end of 1913, not long before America’s entry into World War I, the war that would purportedly end all wars and that coincided in its last year with the Spanish flu pandemic

1. I refer to Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* (Bierce 1909–1912).

of 1918. He would resurface as the protagonist of *Gringo Viejo* (*The Old Gringo*), a best-selling novel by one of Mexico's most cosmopolitan writers, Carlos Fuentes (Fuentes 1985). These keywords, then, name discernible conditions that, as in earlier pandemics, are notable for their manifest symptoms and for the mystery of their unaccountable causes. As with any cultural epidemiology, the apparent symptoms of this latest pandemic take precedence over any possible discernment of their causes or of their origin.

The legacy of Hippocrates and Galen teaches us that a diagnosis must correspond to the symptoms of a malady as they manifest themselves in observable reality. These are terms that are made possible by the agglutinative potential of Greek and Latin that has traditionally furnished medical diagnoses a language for identification and description of maladies. The Greek “anthropos”—“man” and the Latin “vir”—“man” can translate each other, and, in that transcription, “virology” as “the study of man” and, by phonetic extension, the study of its homonym, the *vir* of the slimy *virus*, resonate enharmonically, lexically, historically, and politically. This language and keywords aim to correspond to the historical present, to the particular nature of the current pandemic and its distinct cultural manifestations in the USA, a lexicon for the real-time history of what could be called the *COVIDian Age*:

Agnosiosis: belligerent ignorance, incredulous disbelief (cynicism); unshakable self-conviction (righteousness). Agnotology syndrome: In political history, this condition manifests itself as virulent partisanship such as practices of the nineteenth-century US Know Nothing Party and its vestigial twenty-first-century avatars (Kadir 2017: 117–131). In intellectual history, the symptoms morph into what might be called “academatosis,” an affliction in a toxic bubble whose chronic manifestation is a reflexive self-differentiation through contrariness that perverts Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief,” turning that poetic principle into righteous credo and assertive self-conviction. It is a systemic auto-immunity disorder manifested through such terms as swerve, turn, antithetical, pivot. Knowledge, and any truth, invariably, become destined to lie elsewhere and/or otherwise. The struggle between knowing what might be true and what might be

false results in abstention from knowledge and the possibility of knowing altogether. Knowledge, then, becomes relegated to the realm of conviction or of disbelief. In either case, knowledge finds itself derogated to the irresolvable zone between what might be true and what might in fact be the case, with neither truth nor fact having any purchase on what is known. Teaching and learning under these circumstances devolves to a pursuit of corroboration of whatever one happens to think is known or knowable, with any disconfirmation encountered in that pursuit deemed tendentious and invalid.²

Agoromania: exhibitionism, virtual and mediatic (Facebook, Instagram, Blog, Tweeter, TikTok, Meta). Compulsive self-display.

Aleatorisis: acute incidentalism summed up in “Whatever...” Uncontrollable epistemic contingency, a chaotic scramble of cause and effect. Social spasms, fitful ideologies, political paroxysms whose acute instability perpetually evade diagnosis and bedevil prognoses.

Anamania: obsessive repetition, memetic iteration, relentless redundancy, narcissistic multiplication, spectral echo chamber, proliferation of “selfies,” ricocheting identities in endless contest with time and in contention with morphing circumstances.

Autostasi: paralysis, freezing in place/time, cataleptic seizure as hedge against being found (or being found out), avoidance of necessary self-transformation, dread of conversation. Becoming one’s own East German (DPRG) Stasi—the surveillance state and the internalization of the secret police. Servility to invisible and undefinable masters. Freezing in place, self-dumbing into silence. Defensive “playing possum,” or as the Spanish idiomatic expression would have it, “hacerse el sueco” (“to pretend to be Swedish”).

2. Cf. Henry David Thoreau’s concept of “Useful Ignorance” in *Walking* (Thoreau 1851); see also Jacob Bronowski’s reflection on absolute knowledge as deadly ignorance in his *Ascent of Man* (Bronowski 1975).

Self-imposed muteness. Cryogenic public discourse, political quietism—fertile ground of totalitarianism.³

Apeimeiosis: malady of virtual simulation, consensual attribution of reality to online simulacra; the expedient hyperbole of turning absence into presence, presenting the virtual in lieu of the actual. Telework, remote sensing, imaginary sentience, haptic embrace, online teaching, distant learning, telecast, simulcast, outcast. Virtual immunity. Vanishing community. Metaverse.

Apochondria: unremitting hypochondria, perpetually unwell, symptom of undefinable illness as default state; chronic malady as inevitable side effect of any treatment.

Catamorphia: progressive, acute de-formation with toxic effect; *identity* in entropy—a rampant id- without its -entity, eager for its target. Serial engendering of compromised autoimmunity. Eviscerated, denatured, inorganic, deracinated, “conventional” identities and forms. Counter-morphogenesis. Chick (self-)derision. Excarnation—ectoplasmic projection as avatar proliferation of self-multiplicity.

Chronalgia, or dischronia: panic time for “just-in-time” optimizers. Having transitioned from analogue to digital chronometrics, the actuaries have discovered that a stopped watch is no longer ever accurate, not even twice a day; the clock’s face now a blank, an empty page on which any yearning for another time—past, present, or future—can inscribe its own always-timely, delusional narrative. In a time of crisis—epidemic, racial, economic, governmental—the public conversation becomes diverted from the actual, real-time present to the symbolic, other time of residual reality and its historical iconography. A shift of focus from the critical condition that is the legacy of chronic malady in the history of the present to history’s monumental vestiges—statues, toponyms, ceremonial rituals, the flag, documentary and mythological narratives. Gaslighting the present with sanctities (icons) of the past.

Clastiospasmosis: uncontrollable social spasms of iconoclasm periodically targeting historical symbols, institutional names,

3. See Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arend 1951: 77).

and national monuments. Rampant in times of utter futility. Often a desperate last resort against stone statues and street names that do not fight back.

Cyborgopathy: perpetual morphing into androids, humanoids, tweeters, telectronic automatons, memeable avatars, wireless Zoombies and wired Zoombinos, aggregates of algorithms, mutant faces on Facebook and FaceTime; cybernetic stubs;⁴ haptic avatars; cingling singularity that shrink wraps Homo Sapiens leading to anesthetized character and homogenized personality. Neutered iterations, androgynous memes.

De-dementiachondria: relentless assertion of one's sanity, compulsive declaration of one's superior intelligence, obsessive claim to greater wisdom.

Deontolysis: no obligation, no responsibility, no liability, bleached out accountability; beyond duty; banished imputability; implosion into militarism's war-time default alibi of "cluster fuck"; deontology in crisis: from the golden rule to pragmatic tropism; from creditable virtue to virtual credit; from gold standard to malleable plastic—all duty-free.

Disformia: decontextualized priapism, untimely projection, assertive miscue, shrill ejaculation—verbal and otherwise. Gendered (masculine, feminine, complicated) toxicity contaminating public body, space, and discourse with indeterminacy and undefinable (dis-)morphing. Manifested most often as defensive-aggressive shiver.

Efficiosis: techno-dystopia as Human Resources Department. The sharpest minds in charge of the Metaverse. Commodification of the efficiently managed that turns the efficient managers into instrumental commodity. See cyborgopathy, above.

Eleftheriasis: malignant freedom, individual liberty as purely instrumental solecism, personal sovereignty as everyone for him/her/it self, Hobbsian uni-verse or "state of nature"; university as autistic dystopia. Resentful hope / ambivalent

4. For more information, see William Gibson's *Agency* (Gibson 2020).

expectation of a preemptively despised, but imminently awaited, Leviathan savior.

Endoektosis: when an organism, organ, organization, or nation turns the afflictions of its pathologies on itself; inside-out illness, imperial inversion, self-invasion, or imperial militancy turned on the empire itself, hegemonic aggression inflicted on other peoples of the world now self-directed.⁵ Home as “the battle space,” e.g., “Operation Diligent Valor” in Portland, OR, 2020; “Operation Legend” (in other US cities). “Proactive policing”—homeland invasion and preemptive occupation by Homeland Security militias. Regime change come home: sanction, siege, subversion, sabotage of inconvenient election outcomes. Yet another instance of national self-unmasking (see *Proso-popathy*, below.). Shakeup at Pentagon, purge of top civilian leadership, altering of military chain of command, elevating Special Operations Command to par with Army, Navy, and Air Force (pro forma first step for military coup, “color revolutions”—Bolivia, Honduras, Brazil, Venezuela, Egypt, Georgia, Ukraine—and “civil” wars—Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen). 2020 presidential election: Trump’s refusal to accept the outcome and concede, Lt. Col. (ret.) Michael Flynn’s recommendation to declare martial law, suspend the constitution, and have military re-run the election—a reflexive response to election outcomes around the world the US didn’t like and proceeded to do exactly what the army Lt. Col., the indicted, convicted, and pardoned National Security Council advisor Mr. Flynn recommended to Trump should occur at home what so often has been perpetrated abroad. Impunity brought home. Breaching of the Capital by Trump militants on 6 January 2021 as the congressional certification of 2020 presidential election results in a joint session of congress is underway. Postponement of the congressional session, suspension of the constitutional process, however temporary. Yet another unmasking, *gratia plena* to Mr. Trump, of what has been standard operating procedure

5. See O. Henry’s “The Admiral,” for the realm of Anchuria and the coinage “banana republic,” in his *Cabbages and Kings* (O. Henry 1904).

abroad whenever the election outcomes in other nations prove unsuitable for the USA.

Epidemiosis: virulent ailment—sick not only with, but also of the epidemic. A convergence of disease and its symptoms in mutually reinforcing progression. A synergetic convergence and transition of the chronic and the critical from symptoms to syndrome. Anomie—public health and private illness, private health and public illness: insoluble conflict. Dissolution of consensus—political, discursive, scientific, ideological. The pathology of non-negotiable dissensus as meta-epidemic, e.g., the election of Congressional Speaker of the House, January 2023.

Facilitopathy: gradual easing of conscience; shifting from personal responsibility to self-absolution; leaving the caring for the vulnerable to institutionalization; at its most acute, a turn from empathy to apathy, from mindfulness to mindlessness. Shades of “goblin mode,” not coincidentally, the 2022 “word of the year.”

Factophoria: ecstatic attachment to facts, occupational factoid, devotional factotum, incurable ipso facto.

Financiosis: speculative monetary value as index of worth and as transactional criterion. Synonym for cryptophoria, or enraptured, hush-hush mock-money, most serviceable as campaign contribution and pol-purchase currency. Political culture as money laundering machine. Disclosure of FTX Cryptocurrency Company in 2023 as source of political contributions in bi-partisan munificence.

Genitaphoria: telegraphed as “it’s complicated,” trans-hysterical. Fluid gender as floating fulcrum—me first; me, me meme. Epistemic and cultural disembodiment. Transactional biology as social forum and political agon. Echoed anagram—Cis/Trans/Cistrans/Transcis.

Gerantofagia: opportunistic targeting and consumption of the elderly, especially the more vulnerable and the well-heeled. Standard operating procedure prevalent among elderly-care magnates, big pharma marketeers, insurance companies, and online scam artists.

Glossaphasia: multilingual speechlessness. Rebarbative babbling devoid of meaning, mediatic white noise, ghosted political discourse. Lexical anomie. Unsound silence. Mute scream. Deafness to reasoned, meaningful discourse.

Hypernoxia: reflexive impulse to give offense, to do harm, to cause injury; compulsive sadism; random cruelty; tactical violence for nefarious ends; political or military strategy in sectarian, national, and international provocation plots; harming for the sake of harming others; baiting offense to advantage.

Informapathy: information bulimia (from the Greek “bulimia,” literally, “eating the bull”; figuratively, swallowing wholesale mis-/disinformation, “cooked,” “spun,” and “spiked”; the attendant side effects of such unsavory consumption that consumes one, in turn. A condition leading to Infomachia, or information war, with social media and news media as echo chambers and theaters of information war/production, from right wing QAnon to righteous Hasbara megaphones seeking to incorporate propaganda spun as “news” into mainstream discourse and political culture. “Fake news” becomes a pleonasm akin to “true religion.”

Juristenia litigiosa: inordinate recourse to legal action; the quotidian as judgement day; judgmental predisposition; constant perception of self on trial; the world viewed as jury; perpetual self-indictment; confessed guilt as self-absolution.

Machiomania: war as obsession, as panacea, as reflexive default action, as perennial template of national history and cultural self-definition: war on poverty, war on drugs, war on terror, cold war, proxy war, culture wars, economic war, information wars (see *informapathy*, above).

Manicoflexia: hyper-flexing and disproportionate reaction; reflexive mania; defensive-aggressive automatic response. See triggeritis, below.

Mathemalgia: knowledge sickness—sick of what is known, sick of not knowing, diffuse epistemic pain felt but unknowable. Unreliable origin, sense, intent, motive, or authenticity of objects of knowledge. Whatever is to be known, from news to data, meta- and mega-data, packaged and marketed

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on an industrial scale, more often than not for profit. Marketing and brand management as foremost specialties in all media and institutions—private, public, academic, civilian, and military.

Mendaciosis: obsessive-compulsive truth bending. Immersive fabulation. Improvisational reality construction. Expedient truth management, immune to actuality. Self-convinced, self-validating, self-serving pragmatism. The chronic penchant of political figures and institutional operatives to expediently overlook certain facts.

Metastatic ergolapsis: virulent jumping to conclusions; chronically precipitous “therefore”; conviction in the guise of rational outcome; naturalization of prejudice as logical judgement; enthymeme as wholesome and unassailable syllogism. Meme paraded as original, inevitable, and unique result.

Metromania: compulsive “bean counting”; obsessive calculation and measurement. Uncontrollable syndrome of statistical neurosis.

Mnemotropy: dis-remembering/dismembering, proactive and injunctive amnesia (“forget it!”); passive-aggressive memory spin (“who cares?”). Beyond entropy, re-collection as constantly emergent occasion yoked to unpredictable expediency as opportune disengagement, dissociation. Forms of chronic acedia—cognitive and performative—that become acute when recollection coincides with self-collection. A rich field for the work of anamnesiologists; a boundless storehouse and natural laboratory of what is being / has been forgotten, inadvertently or deliberately.

Monetasiosis: the relentless monetization of everything, everyone, everywhere. Monetary value, actuarial and virtual, as supreme and universally defining trait. See *financiosis*, above; *optimania*, below.

Optimania: Compulsive recalibration of everything (and everyone) for maximal pricing and profitability. Transformation of all management and administrative personnel into relentless value adjusters. Old snake oil in new cyber bottles—NFTs; private and iniquitous equities—FTX; haptic shakedown; com-

modification of and by untouchables, political and intimate. E.g., Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop Brand, 2020: "This Smells Like My Vagina Aroma" (instantly sold out), followed by "This Smells Like My Orgasm Aroma" (prime); Former President Donald Trump's superhero NFT cards of himself in heroic guises in December 2022 (sold out within 24 hours). See monetasiosis, above.

Orthomania: truth-obsessed; genuine obsession; obsessed truth.⁶ "Veritas" (motto of Harvard University, dating from 1647), "Lux et veritas" (motto of Yale University, dating from 1701): foundational shading from absolute truth to shades of truth by the shadow of light. Obsessive fact checking. Facticity, truth brigades, factoids, factions, and factotums. End result in times of pestilence, viral and political: a shifting from shades of truth to ulterior motives hiding in the shadows, regimes and regiments of manic mendacity, aberrant lexes and weasel words, e.g., "truthy," "truthiness," "jew-ish" (one of plague-ridden-politics' unimpeachable Everyman Representative George Santos' self-characterizations)—language that subverts meaning and veracity through blatant stealth and bad faith (see prosopopathy, below).

Paranoiphobia: the fear of being fearful. A secondary dread in a world perceived as irreparably dreadful and inescapable.

Performania: "always on," histrionic, perpetual stand-in, anxious supernumerary; always "in the act" with no meaningful role. Improvident improvisation.

Postisis: "post-" sickness/ pre-posterous oscillation. Acute anxiety about what we are after, and about what/who might be after us. Proliferating tags and Post-its for bloggers and imposters. The end of (post-)history and the pursuit of historic ends.⁷

Precariatosis: chronic vulnerability, rampant precariat; acutely transmissible condition, highly infectious, incurable. Endemic

6. See Sherwood Anderson, "the grotesque" in his "Introduction" to *Winesburg Ohio* (Anderson 1947).

7. Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* features a scene in which a Squire speaks to the Knight on posteriors: "Remember, Sire, no matter which way you turn, your rump is always behind you" (Bergman 1957).

insecurity and industrialized security apparatuses, in accelerating inverse ratio. Security machinery efficiently productive of insecurity. Security loop—vicious circle.

Prosopopathy: face-off, defacing, and facial (mis-)recognition. Biometric carnivalization. Masked, unmasked, and masquerade—the trauma of masking, unmasking; weapon used as binomial of “conspiracy theory,” deployed as prophylactic shield and preemptive conspiracy parading as unmasked self-disguise; guise, disguise; persona and impersonation. Explicit face-offs and implicit mass defacement (of self and of others). A mask eventually becomes the face, and the unmasking inevitably leaves one faceless (Spanish: “desenmascarado”/“descarado,” i.e., “shameless”). Trumpism as dread paradigm of the unmasking of America in the eyes of the world. Exemplary manifestation of this effect is the case of Congressman George Santos, if indeed that is his real name, elected in November 2022 to the US House of Representatives from the third district of New York, a suburb of Long Island. See trumpotoxiosis, below.

Quiquimquaria: whoever / whomeverness; to whom it may concern. Indeterminate subject, unidentifiable object predicate, transitive action in search of a plausible target, in the absence of which the target is manufactured.

Realitosis: summed up in “really...?” and “no, really!”; slippery psycholeptis, or reality tv as the dinkum real. Too real to be true, too true to be real, reality is perpetually mooted. Alt-as paradigm and as template. Alt-reality as default position. Unreal substance as reality pretext. Pretense in the guise of impregnable and unimpeachable common sense. Denial and non-negotiable assertion detached from reality. Flight into Metaverse, aka Web3.

Resmorria: madness of/for things. Immaterial objectification, fungible commodification, rampant materialism. Reified dysphoria mirrored in ecstatic and uncontrollable euphoria.

Somatosis: anti-homeostasis, systemic disequilibrium, unstable body and tri-polar body politic in 4D resolution on compulsive public display: political culture consisting, symbiotically,

of “the Deplorables,” “the Depraved,” and “the Deranged,” broadcast, commented, and profitably hectored by “the Despicable” (corporate media, MSM, social media platforms, professional lobbyists, career sycophants).

Systematosis: succumbed to systems. The “modeling” paradigm, inescapable algorithms; endemic mayhem as systemic chaos—obsessive, perpetual disordering of the world into the next new world order.⁸

Triggeritis: locked and loaded and ever-ready to be triggered, or turn into a trigger. Collective neurosis that can only see the world and its history from the barrel of a gun. Secondary symptom in a world, and world order, built and maintained by the gun; endemic and incurable condition of a perpetual war economy. See *manicoflexia*, above.

Trumpototoxicosis: airborne malady transmitted by psychotropic noxious gases, leading to a personality disorder of total self-absorption and blockage of capacity for human empathy. True to its etymology (“to trump” is a Scottish verb for passing odorous gas, “to fart”), the toxicity of these gaseous emanations lead to forms of psychosis that afflict the affected subject and are highly contagious to trailing sycophants and devout ideologues (e.g., Republican Party congressional representatives—126 members, or nearly two thirds of the Congressional House Republicans, as well as 18 Republican state attorneys general from around the country join Texas State appeal to the Supreme Court on overturning 2020 presidential election results). The Trump phenomenon is no anomaly. It is of greatest danger to the nation and to the world not because of the lies it might perpetrate, but because of the truths it unmasks (see *protopathy*, above) and symptomatically represents—inconvenient truths earnestly proclaimed to the world with unabashed, righteous, viral, venal, and vitriolic candor. Trumpototoxicosis is especially virulent in times of epidemic; pestilence is its natural environment.

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8. On “system” as the quickest way to becoming foolish, see John of Salisbury’s *Metalogicon* (Salisbury 1159).

Ubiquumquariatosis: whereverness, rampant dislocation. Unmoored flotsam condition. Geo-spatial indeterminacy, geopolitical disorientation. Beyond the last frontier. Shifting and shifty borders. Undefined ubiquity, voracious territoriality. Inescapable confinement in a loop of self-absorbed Meta-world.

Ubistrophia: pervasive spinning, ceaseless turning, being neither here nor there. No there there, no here here. The endless “turn”; the pointless pivot. Common isolation, precise solitude, solipsistic swerve, cutting-edge loneliness, blunt/blank togetherness. Vapid inanity of marketable common cause—“we are in this together.”

Vaxxolimia nervosa: compulsive hunger for and hoarding of antiviral vaccines by affluent institutions and nations that would rather over-acquire and discard expired lifesaving doses of vaccine than share them with the rest of the world.

Veritosis (see *orthomania*, above).

Virophilia: an unnatural attachment to pandemic plague as expedient instrument of political grandstanding, defended with virile élan, or as opportune platform for paranoid rejection of common cause against a common danger. In either case, a more contagious viral condition than the virus itself. Often reduced in the transgendered vulgate to “toxic masculinity.”

Abstract: The COVID-19 era presents yet another instance of the symbiosis between viral pandemic and pestilence in the political culture of the moment. Through a brief reprise of plague-riven history dating from antiquity, this article explores the symptoms of the current epidemic and offers a number of keywords that characterize the current maladies as viral plague and as political pestilence. The coupling of the viral and the political dates from the third century Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius who took the measure of the plague and political corruption of Rome during his reign. The lexical compendium offered here could constitute a study in cultural epidemiology that defines the exhibited symptoms of pandemic disease in its concurrent medical and socio-cultural manifestations.

Keywords: aetiology, anthropogenic, viral, catastrophe, iconoclasm, epidemic, pandemic, pandemonium, symptomatology, contagion, war, truth, prevarication, facticity, immunity, impunity, simulation, dissimulation, haptic, chronic, algorithms, implosion, syndrome, mask, masquerade

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