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Locked-In Liminality.

From anxiety to method in present-day crisis experience*

Abstract: Against the backdrop of proclamations of a society of fear, risk and panic from the late 1970s to the present, the article takes a lead from fears as productive agents within the ethnographic process. Through the focal lens of pandemic everyday experience, and deploying essayistic ways of thinking and writing, it draws attention to the intersubjective and intercorporeal practice of meaning-making as conceptualised in phenomenology, psychoanalysis and pragmatist semiotics, and outlines its relevance for emergent interpretation and reflexivity.

On an interactive micro-level, the essay explores the moment of 'in-between' that is sparked by surprise or crisis, and opens a transient 'third milieu' where experience can be shared, whilst cultural meaning is in ongoing renegotiation. The idea of this ambivalent space, as marked by indeterminate creative possibilities merging with fear and uncertainty, is followed further through Corona communication and narration, and investigated in its ambiguous effects of consolidating agency, and perpetuating anxiety and ideological exclusion by way of paranoid 'infection'.

The article inquires into the dynamic conceptual potentials of liminality theory, which it transgresses towards a late-capitalist state of permanent exception: What happens when everyday actors find themselves overpowered by paradoxical emotional requirements that cannot be resolved into new sociality? How can ethnographers, with view to their own involvement into the meshes of everyday fears, retain an empathic, yet empirically grounded understanding of pandemic experience and beyond?

Keywords: Intersubjectivity, emergent ethnography, permanent state of exception, Corona pandemic, fear, pragmatist semiotics, society of security

> *"(. . .) ethnographic fieldwork remains an unusually sensitive method. Participant observation obliges its practitioners to experience, at a bodily as well as intellectual level, the vicissitudes of translation. It requires arduous language learning, some degree of direct involvement and conversation, and often a derangement of personal and cultural expectations. There is, of course, a myth of fieldwork, and the actual experience, hedged around with contingencies, rarely lives up to the ideal. But as a means for producing knowledge from an intense, intersubjective engagement, the practice of ethnography retains a certain exemplary status." (Clifford 1983: 119)*

* Translation by Jane Michael. The editorial responsibility for this translation lies solely with the author of the text.

It is early February 2020. We have set out from Graz to spend a few days in Slovenia. My husband and I have made a reservation in a little hostel. The old building is painted inside and out in friendly shades of yellow, and the reception and lounge are bright with colourful decorations inviting guests to join in the carnival celebrations. There we find an elderly lady and have considerable difficulty making ourselves understood with regard to our reservation. We are waiting and looking at the family photos above the reception desk when I notice a sign on the coffee machine: "A smile is a passport that will take you anywhere you want to go." Somehow it seems to me that it is somewhat out of place in this small-town setting in a post-socialist country. After a while I am able to check in with the youthful landlady, who speaks proficient English. Seated behind her reception counter, she uses her mobile phone to photograph our passports: my German one and my husband's British one. Then she suddenly asks:
"What do you think about Brexit?" – "It will be a disaster, terrible", I reply, surprised. "You think so? So many people have gone to live there", she says thoughtfully. "It won't be so easy any more." Her husband had also worked in London. I agree with her; as a result of the paralysing exceptional state which had prevailed since the Brexit referendum in 2016, the mood in the country was bound to have changed. "Yes", agrees our hostess, "it will be more hostile towards foreigners".
I find her next question even more surprising: "What do you think about the virus?" Of course I have read in the papers about the so-called coronavirus and have heard from acquaintances about the discussions regarding the sealing off of Chinese cities and European frontiers; and I have discussed vaccination policy and anti-Chinese racism with students. All the same, I ward off the subject: "I think this is very hyped up. Today it is swine flu, and then another flu, and then it disappears again." – She looks at me sceptically, and then observes cautiously: "It is strange. There are many strange things. It scares you." (FN 06.02.2020)[1]

Monumental fear and academic defence

So where is this trip across the border going to take us? I am certainly not looking to produce yet another analysis of the pandemic crisis. Instead, in the following essay, Covid-19 serves me as a research paradigm in order to investigate via my own and sometimes also circuitous experiences, the question as to how ethnographic understanding arises in today's unbounded society of fear and security. To this end (and I see this less as a contradiction than a necessity) I refer back first and foremost

1 Reference data to my research notes are listed in brackets. All translations of field notes by Jane Michael.

to classic theories of association- and practice-led sense-making. Above all, I draw productively from cultural and semiotic, philosophical and psychoanalytical considerations on the intersubjective and intercorporeal sphere, on cultural explosion, the third milieu and interstructural liminal space, as well as on fear and narrative contagion. With this, I aim to question paradoxical ways of subjectivisation in the situation of an exceptional state of emergency which has become permanent, and which can neither be balanced out in everyday practice nor allayed analytically. But back to the beginning.

The encounter decribed above is ambivalent, marked by curiosity as well as fear, and by transnational openings and boundary-drawing caesuras. As border-crossers, the Slovenian landlady and I felt drawn together as a result of the migrant biographies of our husbands, the Brexit disaster, and the growing xenophobia in the British Isles. At the same time, through my refusal to take "the virus" seriously, I brought the conversation to an abrupt end. The landlady added a final word of foreignness and fear, a vaguely menacing "it" that was bothering her: "It is strange." "It scares you." And then she continued with the check-in while I, having listened to the conversation attentively, resolved to record the exchange in an immediate fieldnote.

At that time, I shared with many of my contemporaries the tendency to dismiss the news about the virus as media hype. But it was also the scientist in me that was reacting: the border researcher who cared about open boundaries between eastern and western Europe (Eisch 1996; Eisch-Angus 2020); the narratologist who had spent years researching the circulation of fear (and epidemic disease) narratives in everyday communication (Eisch-Angus 2019); and, above all, the ethnographer. This meant that what Georges Devereux had formulated on cultural-anthropological defence and distortion strategies in his pioneer work *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, published in 1967, also applied to me. According to him,

> "distortion is especially marked where the observed material mobilizes anxiety. The scientist who studies this kind of material usually seeks to protect himself against anxiety by the omission, soft-pedaling, non-exploitation, misunderstanding, ambiguous description, over-exploitation or rearrangement of certain parts of his material." (Devereux 1967: 44)

The suspicion can be corroborated with regard to my research on *Narrationen der Sicherheitsgesellschaft* [Narrations of the Society of Fear], which I had published under the main title *Absurde Angst* [Absurd Anxiety]. Nonetheless I was surprised when I was addressed as an anxiety researcher or was even reproached in a book review for regarding "fear excessively as an all-dominant element" (Rieken 2019: 196, trans. JM), while failing to consider my own states of fear. Instead, I justified to myself that I had started from the premise of Foucault's security dispositif and its inflationary increasing power of discourse, which I had observed in my English and German research fields since the

beginning of the new millennium. There I had been struggling with the fact that most of the people I questioned had little to say regarding the normalisation of everyday security policies, but that their narratives ran riot in all directions as soon as it was about disaster, fear and uncertainty. Taking my lead from this contradictory finding: that people only speak about security via its dark opposite, I had theoretically spelled out the paradox of (in-)security and extrapolated, with Ernesto Laclau (1996), the contemporary media-political term of security as an 'empty signifier'. Here we can see how (on the one hand) new risks are constantly being evoked in a suggestive manner, with ever-new reasons to be afraid, to protect oneself, to allow oneself to be controlled and regimented. And (on the other hand), how the differential experience qualities of uncertainty become blurred in a promise of institutional security which is as empty as it is all-encompassing and totalising, pretending not to know any other, any exterior outside of itself (Eisch-Angus 2019: 150–157). This model is valuable for explaining the paradoxical power effects of governmental ruling, but it is also highly abstract. Reading socio-cultural signs of insecurity as projective "signifier(s) of pure threat, of pure negativity, of the simply excluded" (Laclau 1996, 38), can in itself become totalising; at least when lifeworld experiences of fear are brought to bear only with regard to their ideological instrumentalisation, whilst their substantiation within the research relationship remains obscured.

Such questions of researching with and about fear became a topic for me when I was invited by Judith Eckert and Susanne Martin to give a lecture during the pandemic year 2020 on a congress panel on the subject of *Angst – Ursache und Folge gesellschaftlicher Spannungen?* [Fear – Cause and Consequence of Social Tensions?, trans. JM]. In their abstract, they described fear as a leitmotif of current social theory, which gets lost in indetermination via contradictory lines of explanation:

> "In more recent sociological diagnoses of the time, fear is declared to be a characteristic feeling of contemporary Western societies. Here fear is interpreted on the one hand as a consequence of social tensions and critical transformations. [...] And on the other, fear is seen as the cause of new, primarily political phenomena and developments." (Eckert/Martin 2020, trans. JM)

The two sociologists link this criticism with the question as to how social fear phenomena can be researched in a more differentiated manner with regard to method, theory and concept. In a monograph (Eckert 2019) and a collection of essays (Martin/Linpinsel 2020) they also trace a line of sociological fear diagnostics. This extends from Frank Furedi's *Culture of Fear* (2006), Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Fear* (2006) and Heinz Bude's *Gesellschaft der Angst* (2014) *[Society of Fear (2017)]* to Ulrich Beck, who lets modern man exclaim emphatically: "*I am afraid!*"[2] (Beck 1992: 49; Eckert 2019: 12; Martin 2020).

2 The italics in all quotations follow the original text.

In Germany, Beck's book *Risikogesellschaft* [*Risk Society (1992)*], first published in 1986, became the high point of a philosophical-sociological debate concerning fear as a reaction to the near-catastrophe of Harrisburg in 1979 and the reactor explosion in Chernobyl. In the totalising manner of his time, Peter Sloterdijk declared panic as the only possible "mode of existence of the consciousness that is hurled in its entirety into time" (Sloterdijk 1987: 51, trans. JM); while, for example, Günther Anders promoted fear as the bearer of hope for a social awakening (Anders 1987). Admittedly, Beck's analysis cannot be reduced to such empty aporetic formulae. Nevertheless, in his definition of fear – which conceals "a new kind of 'ascriptive' fate of danger" (Beck 1986, 8, trans. JM), but also "*political potential*" (Beck 1992: 24) – the inconsistency of an exceptional state echoes through, which is elevated as it were to the role of a cultural monument. He resumes: "Risk society is a *catastrophic* society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm" (Beck 1992: 24).

Building on that, in this contribution I am taking up the significance of fear and the state of being afraid in the neoliberal society of security (Eisch-Angus 2019, 2021b), which was carried to extremes during the Covid-19 pandemic with the paradoxical experience of an exceptional state as normality. In doing so I regard as important an ethnographic approach which sacrifices neither the small-scale experiences of real-life people to the grand theoretical gesture, nor does it deny with the trite slogan of 'fear' the knowledge that this can ultimately only be researched in concrete 'fears of'. Here, however, a further contradiction rears its head: Ultimately it proved to be advantageous for me that I treated the disciplinary requirement to 'theorise' a topic recognised as relevant not via the concept of 'fear', but via societal security discourses. In that I satisfied the fear-repellent scientific compulsion to observe "cultural data in a human vacuum" elsewhere (Devereux 1967: 87), I was able to engage *en passant* with the insecurities which often cropped up suddenly and confusingly in quite different research situations. In the theoretical shadow cast by the 'empty signifier' security, it was easier to take up irritating fears, which resonated in research conversations as they emerged, and to correlate them from there with overarching power dynamics. However, this is a question of nothing less than the possibility of an ethnography that keeps itself separate from the *Zerstörung der ethnologischen Erfahrung durch das akademische Milieu* [destruction of the ethnological experience by the academic milieu, as ethno-psychoanalysts Mario Erdheim and Maya Nadig headline an impressive study from their ethnological teaching experience (Erdheim/Nadig 1984: 11). What Devereux writes on scientific strategies of the "*Elimination of the Individual* from ethnological field reports" or the absolutisation of "*Valid Conceptual Schemes and Methodological Positions* [...] for the affective decontamination of anxiety-arousing material" (Devereux 1967: 89), we recognise also in contemporary disputes:

> "If, however, culturology is held to provide final and compendious answers, and if there is also a – completely unwarranted – fear of a conspiracy to reduce the socio-cultural to the psychological [...], then the culturological, or the superorganic, position is primarily an isolation mechanism, rather than a goal-directed temporary professional stance." (Devereux 1967: 89)

Emergence and crisis: on the intersubjective genesis of meaning and experience

As little as the socio-cultural and the psychological can be separated from each other in ethnographic research, so too are cultural-analytical positions inseparable from temporarily changing experience contexts. Let us return once more to my encounter in the hostel in Slovenia:

Prompted by a British passport, the conversation opened up a broad space of uncertainty, foreignness and indeterminate fears. Associatively, it linked personal, familial and local references with migrant-based worries about the securing of economic livelihood and social exclusion, and with threats to border-crossing mobility and one's own health. All that in the context of two European and global crises with which the landlady confronted me in the catchphrases "Brexit" and "the virus". Ethno-psychoanalytical approaches that refer to the psychoanalysts Georges Devereux and Alfred Lorenzer,[3] who also worked in the fields of anthropology and sociology, place the ethnographic research conversation as the starting point for a dynamic process of interpretation and insight. Herein the intersubjectively communicated fear that is dialectically linked with the curiosity of the researcher, plays a central role (Nadig 1986: 39, 57–60; Erdheim/Nadig 1988; Erdheim 1998). The ethnographic relationship, like any other conversation, develops in an affective transmission space: in the process of a reciprocal being affected by feelings which are prelingually staged, acted performatively and put into words in the flow of associations. Whereby emotion, interaction and association are just as corporeally bound as they are expressions of peoples' lived world-relatedness, which is formed socio-culturally and hence power-laden.

It is precisely this inter-subjective space for experience and discourse that phenomenology opens up with the concept of intercorporeality (Wehrle 2016):

> "The sense lies [...] not behind the visible, but in the the sensuous event itself. When two 'bodies' meet, a force field of interaction is formed between them: within this, a mutual sounding out takes place, a reciprocal synchronisation [...]. The intercorporeality is thus characterised as a situation in which both partners are involved

3 Lorenzer described the formation of corporeal, pre-linguistic and yet already culturally formed sense with the concept of Scenic Comprehension, which approaches "the ideas of the subject [...] as a realisation of relationships, [...] as contexts that are understood as interaction" (Lorenzer 2000: 142–143).

> from the outset, and whose sense surpasses the individual bodies." (Wehrle 2013: 12, trans. JM)

Referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maren Wehrle describes the body not only as a mediating authority, but as "a third milieu", which only then brings to light communicative sense (Wehrle 2013: 8). This corporeal 'intermediary' is in itself ambivalent: it represents the "factuality, our *corporeality*, [and] hence the precondition for every subsequent form of reflection", while it will conversely require its breakdown in order to perceive and reflect on our affective common ground (Wehrle 2013: 8, trans. JM).

Against this background, fears which manifest themselves in the intersubjective / intercorporeal dynamism of relationships, gain a dual function for the ethnographic cognitive process. By disturbing the flow of conversations and relations, and bringing about disruption and critical interruptions, they, firstly, arouse attention and pose questions. Secondly, on the level of content and analysis, fears can suggest not only real-world threats but also institutionally determined expectations and role patterns, and norm and identity structures on the part of all conversation partners. In their fears, the latter become comprehensible as beings that are rooted in culture and history: "The fear of the researcher forms, together with the fear of the informant, the fragile framework for a research process, in the course of which the image of the foreign lifestyle is sketched out", writes Mario Erdheim (Erdheim 1998: 163, trans. JM).

It was such a comprehension process that started for me with the spatial-corporeal encounter on a specific day and in a specific place in Slovenia. In my recorded notes the sunny breakfast room, the informal atmosphere, the pictures, wall decorations and labels, the shared English language, but also the pleasurable anticipation of a few days' holiday resonated multilingually and auspiciously, while the broad counter marked the otherness between the landlady and her guest. It stood there as a physical boundary within the room, as a threshold, across which the Slovenian landlady and the German visitor could bring together their different experiences and points of view. By association, here the attitude already became apparent which would continue to engage me within the changing contexts of the pandemic: how the collective destabilisation of physical security and governmental border regulations were constantly referring anew to a differential other, whether infectious viruses or foreign people, but also how people find community and resistant agency in moments of crisis.

The impetus came from the Slovenian landlady, in that she interrupted the routine process of the check-in with her questions. She transferred as it were the critical medial discourse which concerned her into the sphere of ethnographic relationships. Here we can continue our thoughts methodologically with the ethnologist Paul Willis: for him, significant research data arise "through the status of the method as a social relationship, and specifically through the moments of crisis in that relationship and its to-be-discovered pattern of what is / what is not shared: the contradiction within and between these things." (Willis 1980: 93–94)

It is these moments of "contradiction", "crisis", "disturbance", but also "surprise", which create hitherto unseen relational connotations in the intersubjective movement (Willis 1980: 90–93). They thus appear to be not only confrontationally disruptive but also exploratory. This again suggests an analogy with the ambivalent functions of these moments of disturbance in Freudian psychoanalysis and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, where interpersonal irritations provoke emotions and fears as well as generating new insights (Brudzińska 2005). As a third contemporary, around the turn to the twentieth century the philosopher and logician Charles S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatic semiotics, coined the expression abduction for precisely this way of permitting analytical insights to emerge in dialogical negotiations of world views:

> "Its occasion is a *surprise*. That is, some belief, active or passive, formulated or unformulated, has just been broken up. It may be in real experience or it may equally be in pure mathematics. [...] The mind seeks to bring the facts, as modified by the new discovery, into order; that is, to form a general conception embracing them." (Peirce 1998: 287)

For Peirce, too, the trigger for this imaginative process of everyday or scientific reasoning is the confrontational questioning of the expectations of a (researching) subject in a social context. Suddenly and unpredictably, we find ourselves confronting a foreign perspective which is the opposite of our own convictions. In a move to interpret this clash, we seek to understand it and to integrate it into new concepts, by comparing the sign complex in question associatively with the context of our own experience: with sensory impressions, feelings, the latest political information, narratives, memories and collectively remembered images, theses and theories ... Whatever emerges in these abductive discoveries, can act as a third, mediating symbolic aspect ('interpretant') in the triadic signification movement of pragmatic semiotics, which can resolve and objectify the relationship between the signs to be interpreted ('representamen') and their possible meaning ('object'). However, the signified object of the original symbol in this triad is never 'completely' understood but is always only temporarily determined with regard to contextually suggested aspects of meaning. Furthermore, as the interpreting symbol in turn raises new questions and refers to new contexts, on all levels of cultural (self-)understanding an incessant, open process of infinite semiosis proceeds as a "continuous interpretation of symbols through subsequent symbols (and actions)" (Nagl 1992: 33).[4]

4 I have written in greater detail on the semiotic mechanisms of ethnological research and interpretation processes elsewhere as a result of my research material acquired during the Covid-19 pandemic (Eisch-Angus 2024).

This concept of infinitive semeiosis means nothing less than a systematic foundation of emergent relational research within intersubjectively constituted social spaces. This corresponds all the more to the ethnographic knowledge process, just as Peirce, too, understands the emergence of meaning and significance as an action that creates reality from sensory and corporeal impressions. For this reason, in 1905 he refuted Hegelian idealism: interpretative knowledge, as "thought, representation, triadic relation, mediation [...] can have no concrete being without action, just as action cannot exist without the immediate being of feeling on which to act" (Peirce 1998: 345). Here it is by no means Peirce's intention to silence emotionally governed sense-making by means of theoretical formalisation.[5] However, he sees himself as subjected to the same scientistic reservations which – then as now – apply also to both psychoanalytical and phenomenological thinking: "I hear you say: 'All that is not fact; it is poetry.' Nonsense!" (Peirce 1998: 193)

In her contribution on emotion as everyday practice, Monique Scheer pointed out in 2012 that the praxeological theory "that [...] concerned itself with overcoming the dichotomies of subject/object, mind/body, and individual/society has not included an elaborate discussion of the topic of emotion" (Scheer 2012: 199). This, I should like to add, applies particularly to the everyday cultural contextualisation of fears. Nonetheless, the praxeological inclusion of the emotional can be considered as European-ethnological consensus.[6] Whereby disciplinary colleagues like, for example, Alexandra Schwell and Oliwia Murawska, know how to take advantage of their own anxiety responses within the contemporary political and governmental discourse concerning security or climate change (Schwell 2018; Murawska 2020). Finally, in 2017, Almut Sülzle demanded the "methodical understanding of research *about* and *with* emotions" as "doing emotion" with regard to supervisory interpretational group work (Sülzle 2017).

From here it seems to me that it is essential to recall the methodological and epistemological foundations which were achieved more than a century ago for an understanding of the intersubjective formation of cultural meaning as a bodily-emotional practice from a phenomenological, psychoanalytical and pragmatic-semiotic perspective. They teach us, within the triadic interpretation process, to take up binary juxtapositions of own and foreign, subject and object, internal and external as

5 Here I refer to Grounded Theory, which is based on a pragmatic foundation. Despite all the merits of opening up ethnological knowledge generation, it still seems to me that its multi-stage method apparatus very much has the tendency to isolate the emotional driving force of cognition from its object.

6 By way of example, I refer here to the Österreichische Volkskundetagung (Conference of Austrian European Ethnology) in 2013 and the conference publication *Emotional Turn?! Europäisch ethnologische Zugänge zu Gefühlen & Gefühlswelten* [Emotional Turn?! European-Ethnological Approaches to Emotions & Emotional Worlds] in which the discipline discusses the new emotionalisation of everyday cultural studies critically and reflexively in a variety of ways (Beitl/Schneider 2016).

temporary positions dependent upon context, which nonetheless express their own realities. In this movement, 'relations' can also be experienced as social relationships, 'associations' may connect to equivocal associative processes between bodies and emotions, and 'affects' are being conveyed through our empathetic feeling in the field. All these connotations refer just as much to cultural circumstances of discourse and power, as they are nonetheless only realised in the third milieu of encounter and experience. In an ethnography which in this way acts intersubjectively and progresses processually to objective knowledge, it seems to me that we can do largely without shadow-boxing against subjectivism and essentialism.[7] Conversely, ostentatious claims made regarding self-reflection and counter-transference can easily end in empty poses of empowerment on the part of the ethnographer, and should therefore safely be left to the psychoanalytical and supervisory professionals.

It is a question not of revealing what is below the surface, but rather of a hermeneutic attention[8] to the multi-perspectival (emotional) contexts of everyday experience, as they appear in the research process and are translated into written or pictorial sources. These are by no means limited to 'classic' field-research materials. Admittedly, it has just become painfully evident during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic that spatially and corporeally situated relations imply more than an outdated field-research paradigm and can by no means be digitally substituted just like that (Lems 2020; Eisch-Angus 2021a). Of course, however, the emotional resonances which are also involved in quite different mediatised or historical sources, can similarly be interpreted in varying contexts as they emerge. In any case, fear may always catch up with us: when an open-ended process of research and interpretation has to be endured in generating constant irritations of prefabricated research questions, and then, when fear inadvertently becomes topical in research dialogues (even if it is only in my arrogant resistance to fear as a tourist and academic who, on the threshold of the pandemic, unintentionally opened up a broad space of media-based discourse on fear and pestilence).

7 With regard to tendencies of disembodiment and dematerialisation as well as the susceptibility to ideology of anti-essentialising positions which no longer aim to mediate between experience and discourse, see Eisch-Angus (2019: 511–513), and from the point of view of a body-phenomenological feminism, see Wehrle (2016: 236–238).

8 According to Peirce, this hermeneutic perception also arises as a confrontation of the perceiving and interpreting individual with oneself, or as the temporary merger of two separate conscious minds and perspectives as "that mind, into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place" (Peirce 1998: 478). On the subject of the cultural significance of autocommunication, see also Lotman (2010a: 31–52).

Liminality and liminality theory – the third milieu in the research process

In February 2020, after the topics of avian flu and swine flu in the 2000s, I baulked initially at the prospect of examining yet another epidemic. As in the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise, I had spent over a decade hunting down the circulation of fear narratives in my own, neoliberally securitised daily life (Eisch-Angus 2019). Time after time I had inevitably ended up with the paradoxical indistinguishability of hype and the reality of experience. And yet, the temptation of getting involved in this unexpected intensification of my research focus on security and permanent crisis finally won. With the first lockdown I found myself thrown into a confusing conflict situation of fears and fear dialogues, in which the unreal aspects of the pandemic and its deadly reality, media-driven panic-making and reassurance campaigns, the excessive demands of working at home and the enjoyment of a sunny time out, existential economic fears and worries about family members, over-regulation and chaos, restriction and dissolution of boundaries were continually intertwined while contradicting each other. At the time the numerous academic, museum and media calls to write and collect made it only too clear that I was swimming on a wave of auto-ethnographic attempts at coping (Eisch-Angus 2021a). Whether in that March of 2020 my European ethnology peers feared the "dissolution of accustomed routines and order" as the gateway to authoritarian control policies, or hoped in an absurdly utopian way for "creativity and a wealth of ideas" which would create new normalities (dgv 2020: 14, trans. JM) – at all times Victor W. Turner's old-school anthropological theory of *Structure and Anti-Structure* seemed to impose itself as a blueprint for an understanding of this unreal epochal crisis of all our daily lives (Turner 1995 [1969]).

And yet, Turner's concept of liminality, which for him was inspired by Arnold van Gennep's wild journey of discovery through human ways of appropriating to passage situations (van Gennep 2019 [1909]), offers far more than a three-stage model of the ritual transformation of institutional structures of order. In the way in which he sets subjectivity, ambiguity and polysemy as "transitional qualities" (Turner 1995 [1969]: 107)[9], he focuses socio-anthropological thought processes on "the period of margin or 'liminality' as an interstructural situation" – as a *betwixt and between*, and hence as a third milieu, which humans as "'interstructural' beings" experience in their everyday lives (Turner 1979: 234). It therefore follows,

> "that, for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of hogh and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. [. . .] In such a process, the opposites,

9 See also Szakolczai 2009: 147

> as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable. [...] In other words, each individual's life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communitas, situations and transitions." (Turner 1995 [1969]: 97)

Just as Turner integrates the inter-subjective mechanism of cultural sense-making into a dynamic theory of interstructure, so the cultural semiotician Jurij M. Lotman translates the triadic semiotic process of unlimited semiosis into a holistic model of the cultural space, the 'semiosphere' (Lotman 2005: 206). This is continuously differentiated in dialectic processes of heterogenising frontier-crossing on the one hand, and of order-securing frontier demarcations on the other, and creates new hybrid systems of language, interpretation and memory (Lotman 1990: 125). In doing so, Lotman focuses our attention on the peripheries and on marginalised border populations, who open up to a dialogue with an Other who is initially incomprehensible and foreign (from which standpoint they can also assume successively the opposite role of normative power centres, Lotman 1990: 145). On quite different – literary, mythological, everyday – levels, Lotman describes a movement of translation, recoding and understanding, which comes from the trans-border practice of polylingual threshold beings and which in the ongoing, relational incorporation of new contexts makes culture possible in the first place:

> "This is one of the mechanisms of meaning-generation. Its special feature, in particular, lies in the fact that the very nature of meaning can only be determined by virtue of its context, i.e. as a result of turning to that wider space that lies outside of meaning." (Lotman 2009:34–35)

I am introducting Lotman here not only because he teaches us as ethnologists and anthropologists to think of culture and memory consistently from the starting point of processual change. What I find particularly stimulating is how in his late work he opens up the paradox of the culture-generating and sense-making non-place, where bordering and border-crossing come together. In doing so he speaks of the "moment of explosion" (Lotman 2009: 57), which can be precipitated through a critical event, or also simply through an irritation, an inability to understand or a broken belief in causal rules. When continuity and normality have unintentionally been called into question in this way, a liminal space of unpredictable consequences will be opened up. This intermediate space "is, as it were, excluded from time" (Lotman 2009: 57) and characterised by "a sharp increase in the informativity of the entire system" (Lotman 2009: 14), by subjectivity and affectivity, ambiguity and uncertainty, imagination and creative action potential.

> "The future appears as the space of possible states. [...] The present – this is the outbreak of the as yet space of meaning generation. It includes within itself the potential of all possible future paths of development." (Lotman 2009: 13–14)

Lotman again shares this idea of an open space of possibilities, which lends itself both to sociocultural interaction and collision, with psychoanalytical and phenomenological approaches – and with Victor Turner:[10]

> "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner 1979: 236).

So both Turner and Lotman, as Albrecht Koschorke puts it, give us "conceptual tools, in order to comprehend the *intertwining of structuring and destructuring tendencies*, indeed even their functional interconnection" (Korschorke 2012: 119, trans. JM). For ethnography, this means that processes of societal transformation can be traced back to the practice of everyday sense-making, in that the conflictuous, the non-compliant, the changeable is actually not, as Turner frequently implied, subordinated to "structural-formalistic concepts of a given static normality" (Beck/Knecht: 65, trans. JM). Conversely, however, explosive dynamics should not be analytically disconnected from opposing tendencies of dichotomous structures of order and hence removed from the critical reflection of ideology and power. In (European) ethnology, the ritual-theoretical misunderstanding of Turner's concept no doubt plays a role which should not be underestimated (Eisch-Angus 2021b: 113). All too frequently the focus is placed on rituals which, however, really do not form part of the anti-structure. By contrast, they serve to facilitate performative restructuring, and hence the channelling, disambiguation and defusing of the polyvalent energies of liminal borderline states. Already before the Covid-19 pandemic, a comeback of liminality theory in cultural anthropology had been asserted (Horváth et al. 2015: 1). And yet, what Turner developed in the 1960s by demonstrating initiation processes, many scholars are simply content to 'apply' to present-day crises and processes of cultural change instead of developing his ideas in the fields of cultural theory and methodology, or reading them productively against the grain.

Just like the ritual does with the potentials of liminal states, the ritual-theoretical narrowing of liminality theory expels its analytical edge, the risk and also the fear. This raises the question as to how far the critical rejection, as well as the affirmative adaptation of Turner should not ultimately be attributed to an anthropological defence against fear as the "the affective decontamination of anxiety-arousing material" (Devereux 1967: 89). Or, one can ask to what extent we are succumbing to a

10 What is described e.g. by phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels as "the thought of a dubious order, which makes possible by making impossible, which limits by excluding, which shapes by deforming" (Waldenfels 2013: 18–19, trans. JM), Maya Nadig and Donald W. Winnicott explore psychoanalytically "as a potential space, in which creativity, symbols and differences, in other words also culture and cultural significance can develop" (Nadig 2000: 93, trans. JM).

ritual exorcism of all that is culturally and scientifically/academically impure, which Turner together with Mary Douglas describes as "'a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction'": "The unclear is the unclean" (Turner 1979: 236). After all, it is no small thing to engage with what the third milieu of the ethnographic process brings about by way of both stimulating and frightening experiences – as there are the unpredictability of research results, the grey areas, ambivalences and indecisive aspects of common-or-garden understanding, the dissolution of our dichotomic assessment patterns into good/critical/progressive versus bad/unpolitical/reactionary topics, the incompatibility of ethnographic openness with many a socio-scientific requirement, the unpredictability of subjectivity, and the relationships and fears ingrained in the research process (Erdheim/Nadig 1988).

Communitas, agency and narrative contagion

In the spring of 2020 the philosopher Slavoj Žižek described the eruption of the pandemic as "a stupid natural contingency", apt for "bringing permanent fear and fragility to our lives" (Žižek 2020: 52). From here, the virus has increasingly and irrefutably revealed itself to be something absolutely other and alien, to which we can attribute no sense and that drives us before it with its random mutations. At that time most people experienced a Turner-like liminal state which, however, must lead to new frontiers of societal normalisation. From the sober perspective of the normalised crisis of 2021 and 2022, when I first drafted this essay, it is worthwhile taking an ethnographic look once again at the "affective fields" of the pandemic (Svášek 2020): "We are sliding into an exceptional state which we are reluctant to accept", I typed on 13 March 2020 after a conversation in the tea kitchen in our university department in Graz. "I am exhausted, tired." The breathlessly interconnected research notes with which I chased the events during the week before the first Austrian lockdown, reflect how between live-tickers, political and medical radio flashes, bureaucratic announcements, administrative working-off, digital rescheduling, cancellation of travel and event plans, time seemed to accelerate, slow down, come to a standstill and tie itself in knots.

> What is now known as the pandemic is preceded by rumours that the university would be closed and even that there would be a national lockdown. "Who knows, anything is possible", comments my colleague Arthur, while Helga defines a 'before' and 'after', in which nobody knows what would happen in between:[11] "Afterwards a lot of things will be possible which were out of the question up until now!" In the meantime, the contradictions are coming thick and fast. Regulations change from day to day and come across just as categorical, as unreliable, calling into question both teaching and the continuation of our work. The existential importance of virological information

11 All the namesare pseudonymised.

> corresponds to its inflationary loss of validity. While our accustomed daily routine is collapsing, we are beginning – the students, the administrative and the scientific staff of the department – to talk and to create for ourselves little elements of normality in this state of emergency. (FN 13. 03. 2020)

At noon on the same day I described in my diary the comings and goings in the tea kitchen:

> "Every time a new person comes in, the subject is the same: Whether we shall still be able to come here next week?" Sophie has photographed the empty supermarket shelves; we older ones comment with pictures we remember from postwar years and from the countries of the Eastern bloc, which make the hoarding of scarce food supplies seem culturally sensible. "I have just told the others about the latest mail from the Dean stating that applications for business trips would basically no longer be approved [. . .]. Helga: It was at that time that the news of the first death in Vienna reached us. [. . .] Linda interjects quickly: 'I hope my boy friend hasn't read it yet!'" We imagine a media choreography of events and decisions which affect us all, but are simultaneously experienced as synchronised and time-shifted. We keep each other up to date, and attempt to keep us and our loved ones out of the viral undertow of this frightening flood of information, knowing that this is just not possible. Our own fear points to the fear of others: "I am glad that we're all so normal here. I feel sorry for those who are becoming so hysterical", is a comment that I currently hear in one form or other these days. (FN 13. 03. 2020)

For an entire week what Turner calls communitas (Turner 1995 [1969]) arose in our tea kitchen: a communality which we experienced with intensified emotionality, and which created a breathing space of certainty amidst uncertainty, beyond structure and authority. The little scene at the lunch table in the tea kitchen, neither private nor professional, makes clear how the concept of communitas expands the intersubjective relationship space into a liminal communality of social groups. Here, too, corporeal-affective connectedness and communicative restructuring of our world understandings interact: Fear and uncertainty can be socialised as a shared experience and transfered into our common memory; performative practice and discursive sensegiving flow together to a new agency and make possible a hint of normality in the abnormal. It is no coincidence that images of physical activity (eating, sleeping, living, moving) in conjunction with body-related cleansing rituals and pandemic coping mechanisms (hand washing, disinfecting, mask-wearing) dominated the experience of the first lockdown.

> While Helga is proud to have acquired the very last packet of toilet paper in the supermarket, Marie shows us all on her smartphone a poster of an Australian joke about "the idiots who think they need to hoard toilet paper". We women

> laugh as we agree that it is the men who get excited about toilet paper. One of us is presented by her husband with a calculation that they needed to buy toilet paper in case they had to go into quarantine. From this we concoct an absurd logic: "If he has to go into quarantine, and I have been in contact with him, I will have to spend two weeks in quarantine as well, and then I go out, shake hands with someone I don't know and will need to go back into quarantine again. That's what we need toilet paper for!" (FN 12. 03. 2020)

In our contradictory pursual of the global subject of toilet paper we succeeded in performatively recognising our ambivalent anxieties – to translate the impositions of the exploding crisis into caring activity about keeping stocks, while cultural fears of intimacy, contamination and the risk of infection were materialised, and imaginatively exaggerated through the medium of toilet paper.

> I earn gusts of laughter when I spontaneously ask Linda, who is preparing a parcel for the post: "What happens if someone coughs into it?" Over the following days laughter erupts sporadically whenever we imagine infectious letter bombs, while among the secretaries the story spreads that I, as the head of department, have ordered people to cough into the envelopes they send by post. (FN 13. 03. 2020)

It is well-known that liminality and communitas are closely linked with the reversal and temporary suspension of hegemonial roles. Just as our little jokes about toilet paper incidentally voiced the tension between the sexes with regard to masculine assertions concerning science and rationality, so could we succeed in getting our carnivalesque revenge against institutional hierarchies through the Covid-19 topos of intentional coughing at people. In this way, between fear, humour and creative imagination, story-telling appears as a central practice of re-semiotisation and re-socialisation of wordless fears within a communitas of people who share the same feelings.

And yet: Just as it was by no means clear to us at this point whether the coronavirus might be transmissible by post or not, the liberating laughter could not cause the power, the morality or the fear to disappear, which are inherent in the narratives surrounding Covid-19. Whereby jokes and rumours are not the only forms of story-telling which draw their narrative energy from the ambivalent tension of communality and fear. In the spring of 2020, a widely spreading urban legend of disinfectant stolen from the hospitals (which could well be true) gave rise to outrage not only in our tea kitchen, but brought together the European public as a moral communitas. It was quite obvious that the cleansing, yet threatened power of the disinfectant referred not only to the deadly risk of infection by the virus. Passing the narrative on also facilitated social self-assurance through projective othering, and allowed to

maintain agency through the performative exorcism of a questionable Other, outside the boundaries of one's own in-group:

> While in the public sphere the fear of infection is increasing and disinfectant has become scarce, the chemistry department is rationing its distribution to the other departments. On 12 March two large pharmacist's bottles of the stuff are standing on our table. Do we need it, isn't hand-washing just as effective? Helga is up in arms about a hoarding shopper whom she has observed filling his car with disinfectant. Ingrid has heard that people are stealing disinfectant from hospitals – and I have heard the same story on the BBC News (BBC 2020). Irmgard eventually locates the story from the perspective of eye-witnesses in a local hospital in which her daughters work. There, of all places, where societal fear comes face to face with the deadly reality of the disease, it seems visitors were stealing disinfectant or even purloining the entire dispenser. Who would do such a thing? (FN 12. 03. 2020)

Everyday narratives like these represent a sort of heuristic connecting link between the intersubjective micro-level and the cultural macro-space of society.[12] Correspondingly, in his early work Lotman extrapolated the narration as an analytical level, on which attention is drawn to the interstructural dynamism of norm and the infringement of norms (Lotman 1977 [1970]; Eisch 1996: 86–90): an unexpected critical event, the prohibited border violation of a movable figure turn an uneventful description into a narrative. Imaginative liminal spaces open up which are characterised by surprising possibilities both for action and for indeterminate threats.

In narrative exchange these potentialities are shared inter-bodily, interpreted intersubjectively and taken up societally. However, as long as the disturbances that prompted the narrative have not been clarified, the ambivalence inherent in the narrative structure reproduces itself in ever-new tales of uncertainties. Similarly, the societal communitas will be constantly compelled to prove itself anew. In this way everyday narrations not only foster communitas. Alternating between media and everyday communication, they fuel – mostly inadvertently – the governmental business of viral infection with fear.

12 Here it is worth taking a look at folkloristic narratology, and especially urban legend research, which at an early stage focused on the everyday communicative circulation of fear and the suggestive assertion of moral demands in 'little forms' or mini-narratives (Eisch-Angus 2019: 421–432). For example, also for the Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi the aspect of uncertainty plays a central role in narratives of the "invasion of an inconceivable into our ordered world" (Lüthi 1965: 12, trans. JM).

Affect, Power, Paranoia. The governmental state of emergency

In his philosophical polemic on the subject of the pandemic, Žižek attributes such mechanisms of the "spreading of affective infections" (Žižek 2020: 80–81) directly to the nature of viruses and hence equally to a "coincidence of the opposites". Viruses are neither living creatures nor mere chemical substances, "they are a kind of living dead. A virus is alive in its drive to replicate [...]" (Žižek 2020: 78). Starting from this premise, Žižek declares the "*infection*" to be an anthropological "basic category [...]: a human subject is a passive empty medium infected by affect-laden cultural elements which, like contagious bacilli, spread from one to another individual [...]." (Žižek 2020: 80) This analogy may seem far-fetched, but it seems to me that it is nonetheless instructive for my train of thought in three different ways. Firstly, we can derive from Žižek's concept the genesis of multilingualism and culture described by Lotman from the antagonistic momentum of the explosion.[13] However, if we look at the state of humans driven by affective fear, who continually reproduce narrative brain constructs in the senseless attempt to overcome their emotional parasites, our attention is drawn to a rather unhealthy version of unlimited semiosis. Especially the virally circulating Covid-19 narratives speak of this as they multiply themselves in infinite feedback bubbles in the virtual space. I shall return to them in due course. Foucault's early concepts of governmentality, in the sense of both externalised and internalised socio-economic effects of liberalist governance, repeatedly revolve around control and the circulation of the risks of epidemic contagion. This makes it clear that the above-mentioned associations of socio-political constellations with fear, corporeality and disease prevention are more than just metaphorical (Foucault 2009: 10, 57–68). Rather, they point to a fundamental contradiction within 'governmental' rule, which forms the individual as calculable part of a biopolitical mass and at the same time as a fear-driven subject who is susceptible to suggestion. Correspondingly, Foucault tells us about the affective virulence of discursive uncertainties:

> "The horsemen of the Apocalypse disappear and in their place everyday dangers appear, emerge, and spread everywhere, perpetually being brought to life, reactualized, and circulated by what could be called the political culture of danger in the nineteenth century [...]; there are campaigns disease and hygiene; [...] everywhere you see this stimulation of the fear of danger which is, as it were, the condition, the internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism." (Foucault 2008: 66–67)

13 In referring to Lotman, Koschorke develops this thought further as regards communication theory: "For him, indeterminacy is not a characteristic of artistic and empirical phenomena, but an effect of the communicative structure. Every transfer of signs, every cultural communication, indeed every act of understanding contains a remainder which does not 'tally', which remains ambiguous and vague. [...] Every act of communication generates an excess of possibilities, and it is in particular the lack of calculability, the overflow of disorder across the order, which ensures cultural flexibility and hence societal survival" (Koschorke 2012: 125, trans. JM).

The prerequisite in Foucault's work is a power-political paradigm change from the disciplinary control mechanisms of the nineteenth century to the dominance of the inherently contradictory dispositive of security. Thereby, however, even the paradox itself is ideologically totalised: While new risks are constantly being summoned, the target to be aimed at remains absolute safety. Here an irresolvable fear is to be simultaneously included and excluded. It can be experienced daily as an irrevocable liminal state, thereby corrupting the meaningful and culture-creating potentiality and indeterminacy of the 'third space'. In this way, in the neoliberal society of risk and creativity, the liminal qualities of emotion and passion, acceleration and discontinuity, crisis and uncertainty become a normative and economically calculable target – which nevertheless is not permitted to arrive at a fixed order and reassurance (Eisch-Angus 2019: 32, 2021b: 85). In this way the interactive correlativity of order-ensuring demarcation and its resistive transgression – of structure and communitas – gives way to their powerfully proclaimed simultaneity; everyday contradictions are absolutised instead of being clarified in their relevant contexts and dialectically translated into a new normality.

The way in which the productive potential space of our everyday environment is charged with permanent risk in this manner, recalls the figure of the enterprising self as described by Ulrich Bröckling: a subject, which aims at forming itself (equalling being formed) in the emphatic awareness of freedom and risk, and at the same time optimising and controlling itself even in its most private recesses (Bröckling 2015, 2020: 6). In the spring of 2020, Bröckling observed an escalation and at the same time a preventive turn of this subjectivisation logic under the auspices of the pandemic "dispositive of fear and care" (Bröckling 2020: 8, trans. JM): "The inverse optimisation under the premise of protecting lives (always with reference to one's own population) turns the regime of unlimited increase into the negative: always act in such a way that your actions reduce the probability of infection." In that disciplinary state, power relies on the individual sense of responsibility, e.g. with contact-tracking-apps – "the pressure on the users increases to see themselves not only as an endangered person but also as a source of danger" (Bröckling 2020: 9, trans. JM).

In Austria, from March 2020, self-care became a national duty in a particularly striking way with the government campaign, in translation, "Look after yourself, look after me. Together we can protect each other". On Sunday, 15 March 2020, when the federal government in Vienna proclaimed a nationwide lockdown, and overnight Graz university sent its staff to work at home, not only the possibilities for informal exchange in our department were radically axed. Above all, the productive ambivalence of the inter-corporeal meeting space of everyday life was now subjected to an unresolvable suspicion in that our own as well as the bodies of others were, in the interests of their protection, branded as a life-threatening source of danger. During the following weeks and months, it was a question of internalising and embodying

this paradox of societal contact as a moral demand: We have all experienced how the contradictions grew and multiplied exponentially within the digital potential space between the imperative of social distancing, the intimate need for proximity within the family, the destabilisation of social communities, professional pressures to perform, and overturned regulations. All of this created a pressure of responsibility in dealing with what were seen as everyday trivialities, yet which always concerned the whole thing, namely life itself.

Following the anthropologist and psychoanalyst Gregory Bateson, this need to act when every decision is inevitably the wrong one can be described as a double bind: a state of being that results from the paradoxical entanglement of intersubjective needs and is associated with profound fear (Bateson 2000 [1969]). Although by no means everyone was afraid of becoming infected by the virus, social spaces were haunted by an indeterminate, morally charged fear in an atmosphere of unreal risk and, at the same time, of very real everyday threats to one's own person, one's family, one's existence. In this it becomes difficult to distinguish between internal problems, real-world necessities and socially induced fears, leading "to a fusion of internal and external anxieties, which – because the frightening [and powerful] 'object' is no longer locatable – paralyses the individual and makes them controllable" (Erdheim 1988b: 343, trans. JM; Eisch-Angus 2021b: 75–79). According to Mario Erdheim and Freud,[14] it is exactly this fusion that characterises the disciplinary function of social institutions.

While institutional power in society is increasingly intangible – invisible and incalculable as a virus – our everyday lives and most intimate interior worlds become caught up in the experience of a state of emergency which has acquired permanency. Fear, morality and the needs of social communitas merge to form a contradictory conglomerate that can scarcely be clarified in dialogue. This experience of totalised paradoxicality in present-day everyday life is indivisibly linked with contemporary qualities of societal power. I should therefore like to make use of another philosophical idea, namely that of a "permanent state of exception", which Girgio Agamben deduced in 2003 as a political-juridical practice of the twentieth century (Agamben 2005: 87).[15] How in this normalised liminal state the inherently incompatible claims to validity of 'life' and normative 'law' invoke each other and cling to each

14 What Sigmund Freud (2022 [1921]) developed in his essay *Group Psychology And The Analysis Of The Ego* under the impression of the First World War and patriotic leader ideology, has reached in the War in Ukraine a frightening topicality, but also sheds light onto apparently antagonistic effects of subjectivised power.

15 I distinguish this thought from Arpad Szakolczai's thesis of a *permanent liminality*, which he describes as a reduction, misunderstanding or trivialisation of social experience in the modern age (Szakolczai 2009: 162–165).

other, we can observe in the sense of the word in the global pestilence as "a zone of absolute indeterminacy between anomie and law, in which the sphere of ceatures and the juridical order are caught up in a single catastrophe" (Agamben 2005: 57).[16] Agamben's momentum of "urgency" also fits in with the exceptional state of the pandemic (Agamben 2005: 86), whose infectious emotionality we find almost impossible to resist. That, however, needs to be concretised once again in a thick description derived from my Covid-19 research diary:

> "I'm not afraid, [...] that is all nonsense." In the middle of August I am listening to a traveller in the train between Graz and Vienna who raises his voice and becomes increasingly agitated as he speaks on his mobile phone. "They want to vaccinate us", he says, "against an illness that doesn't exist [...], my ex-wife is a doctor". Compulsory vaccination is "an invasive intervention in our bodies" and can be challenged in constitutional law. "It's a danger for the human race", which must be prevented in parliament and on the street, if necessary by mobilising FPÖ[17] members. "I know all about medical law", he emphasises, "I was an insurance agent". (FN 13. 08. 2020)

The mere lack of restraint with which the traveller, his breath rattling and his face not covered by a mask, enacted Agamben's description of the state of emergency in August 2020 I found quite frightening; all the more so when, in the following autumn, the news of far-right anti-vaccination demonstrations in Vienna spread throughout the media. This shows the situation of the present at its most tangible: in the way that in pandemic discourses populist and liberal claims to power and liberty formed an alliance; how the boundaries between political camps, between public, private and physical-intimate spheres, but especially between fiction and truth, became blurred (Agamben 2005: 87); how fear and resistance to fear merged; and how all these contradictions came to a permanent liminal explosion in social media.[18] At the same time, the railway scene aligns with a social verbal clash about right and truth, rationality and emotion, fact and fake – and about whose fear is real or merely 'stirred up'.

As a critical academic (and I positioned myself as such in Slovenia right at the beginning of the pandemic), I quickly found myself allocating the right-wing agitator to the same conspiracy-theory camp as Luise, a young woman with alternative views. I met her at the end of March 2021 when she turned up for work with a temperature and a sore throat. When I spoke to her about it, she inveigled me in agitated ex-

16 Here I by no means follow Agamben's excited proclamation of a state of "bare life" in the early phase of the pandemic (Agamben 2020, Zižek 2020, 73–75).

17 The extreme right-wing party of Austria.

18 Klaus Ottomeyer has summarised these developments from a social-psychological perspective (2022: 215–251).

planations as to why she did not want to be vaccinated under any circumstances, or even simply get tested. She subsequently sent me rationalising evidence against false "corona statistics", the "system", the "pharmaceutical lobby" and orthodox medicine. Breathlessly she linked media control and politics, "the connections between everything", with cosmological apocalyptics (FN 31. 03. 2021). Now she reminded me about cultural-scientific analyses of a 'paranoid' conspiracy thinking which had been taken up before the pandemic with the aim of understanding[19] societal fear narratives beyond psychopathologising individualisation (Ebner et al. 2016a). At the time of my analysis at the beginning of 2022, we all seemed to be familiar with what is meant by a mindset which is obsessed with fear, power and "fear of the power of the media" (Ebner et al. 2016b: 10, trans. JM). Here Timm Ebner et al. call for a second glance: "However, paranoia is not irrationality; it is the excessive interconnection between different relations" (Ebner et al. 2016b: 11, trans. JM). This means recognising

> "that paranoia has always operated in the area where fact and fiction become blurred, even more, that it demonstrates an intrinsic sensitivity for the power of narrative understanding of the world, which radicalises a clear distinction between reality and construction, truth and manipulation and simultaneously leads to aporia." (Ebner et al. 2016b: 13, trans. JM)

And here we are right in the middle of the liminal rollover from over-signification and paradox that I have already described. In this situation, attempts to exclude fear and uncertainty from one's own world and to dismiss them as an evil power are easy to understand. However, in doing so, a train of perpetually new narrative 'sources of infection' is opened up, with ever new fears. I found it all the harder to resist the pull of this approach when Luise could barely stop forcing her worldview on me. In it her fear of institutional external control merged with a moral obligation of self-determination. By healing herself with the powers of the mind and nature, she was also saving the world. In my transcript in my research diary her comments are dominated by a contradictory, monumental fear:

> We wouldn't even be able to go shopping without a test, Luise prophesies. But control is fear, and fear comes from within, she explained to me. It is the fear of oneself which has been keeping us at bay for thousands of years. Fear as "humankind's worst enemy", which reached its zenith in the Covid-19 pandemic with millions of people who died of fright. (FN 31. 03. 2021)

Behind this universalistic overpowering, Luise's frightening susceptibility to illness since childhood can only be ignored with difficulty. However, the way in which she also positioned me on the side of the controlling supreme power and accused me of

19 The slogan of a paranoid style of the political-medial populace was coined by Richard Hofstadter in 1964 (Hofstadter 1996).

panic-making brings out that this matter goes far beyond a transfer of personal fear of infection. The exceptional state which Luise and I experienced inter-corporeally, and acted out intersubjectively, had become an inescapable battle which is not only ours.

> "I won't let myself be drawn into it!" she protests. "Only afterwards do I notice how the fright, a fear – her fear? – scares me to the marrow", I write in my research diary. (FN 31. 03. 2021)

Here I can no longer distinguish from whom, from which interior or exterior this fear comes and what Luise is referring to. Is the reality of the pandemic not exactly in the dependency on medical factual knowledge, which nevertheless constantly demonstrates its medial power base and fictionality? Did we not experience personally the infectious proliferation of everyday pandemic fears, the more we rationalised and attempted to put them in their place?

At this point I pause and ask what an intersubjectively oriented ethnography is ably to supply by way of sense-making, without itself driving the circuits of contagion even further, and without turning the wheel of excessive self-referentiality even more. Here I think that the possibilities of ethnographic comprehension lie above all in its willingness to allow itself to become infected and irritated. After all, everyday communicative paradoxes not only lead to double-bind experiences which make us ill, but are also needed as a precondition for creative world appropriation (Bateson 2000 [1969]: 278). Equally important, however, is to "attempt to halt the machine" following Agamben (2005: 87), and to transfer the ambiguities and conglomerations of the exceptional state into empirically based, context-sensitive knowledge (Willis 1980, 93). A reflexive ethnographic hermeneutics of the unbounded exceptional state of present-day society must re-think much anew, the 'real life' in the digital sphere as well as the smooth transitions to non-human subjectivities, and, time and again, our own imprisonment in the defence against fear and totalisation. However, I am not voicing here the heroic pathos and the word with which Sloterdijk recommended in 1986 that we should endure the paradoxes of the catastrophic modern age in panic mode as "self-experience" (Sloterdijk 1986: 68, trans. JM).[20] As ethnographers we can do better than that: by following the traces of fear, power and crisis empathetically into the interactive spaces of everyday life, in order to arrive at new and different localisations – and vice versa.

20 See here also my "dialogue" with Albert Camus on the figure of the 'absurd self' (Eisch-Angus 2019: 588–608).

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