

A Message to You, Rudy: Hear Reason, or Nature Will Make You Feel Her

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ABSTRACT. This article’s main takeaway is the importance of the question: Why did it take me so much time to realize that the pandemic is real? Cutting across the personal and the collective, the uncanny and the ordinary, the visceral and the rational, this article shows that our philosophies’ and our sciences’ lack of sensitivity to instinct and emotion is a problem.

Keywords: COVID-19; isolation; viral modernity; academic journal; affect

Stop your messing around.
Better think of your future.
Time you straighten right out –
Creating problems in town,
Rudy, a message to you,
Rudy, a message to you.
(The Specials, 1979)

Hear Reason, or Nature Will Make You Feel Her¹

In early 2020, I started following news reports about the coronavirus. I had just returned from a visiting professorship in Beijing; unlike many of “those in the western world [who] keep ignoring the experiences of those in Asia, clinging indirectly to a kind of nationalism closed off to the rest of the world” (Jackson, 2020), I took my Chinese friends very seriously. Nevertheless, the virus seemed so far.... Soon after, the virus came to Europe. I truly felt for my friends from Spain and Italy, who reported unimaginable horror stories about their friends and relatives suffocating in packed hospitals while waiting for someone’s death to get

their ventilator. Yet the virus still seemed so far away.... The first cases of COVID-19 were reported from Slovenia, and a doctor died in a village less than hour's drive from my home. But Slovenia and Croatia have not been the same country for more than 30 years: the virus still seemed so far.... Finally, the virus arrived in my hometown of Zagreb, Croatia. But soothing news reports claimed that there was no virus in the general population, and COVID-19 somehow still seemed as remote as China.

In March, I was scheduled to attend a project meeting at the University of Wolverhampton; I also planned to stay a few days longer and visit my brother in Edinburgh. Without a shade of doubt, I flew to the UK. I may have been foolish, but I was not the only one. No-one in my environment – including my partner, parents, workmates, brother, and UK partners – had challenged my decision. Finally, on my first day in Wolverhampton, I received the first personal warning. My young cousin, whose London dormitory was evacuated because of a confirmed case of COVID-19, phoned me and asked me to buy him a plane ticket home – his credit card was empty, his parents had not responded to his phone calls, and he was panicking. I excused myself from dinner, quickly purchased his ticket in my hotel room, returned to the pub, and laughed off his ‘over-reaction’ with my Wolverhampton friends.

Then there were other warnings. One evening in Edinburgh, I was served hand sanitizer with my pint. My train from Edinburgh to Birmingham was full of people with face masks and gloves on. I rationalized things the best I could. Those posh pubs really go overboard with service these days; face masks must be some latest fad.... Yet when I flew from Birmingham airport, less than 24 hours before the complete closure of the borders, the pandemic started to feel real. Birmingham, Frankfurt and Zagreb airports were buzzing with excited chatter about the virus. All staff were masked. Every sneeze and wheeze around me seemed as loud as a jumbo jet. Upon my arrival at Zagreb, a fully masked customs officer pressed a nice-looking pink thermometer to my forehead. And when ‘astronauts’ discretely dragged away a middle-aged woman in the thermometer queue next to mine, I felt like a cow going to the slaughter. For me, the COVID-19 pandemic had started.

A Message to You, Rudy

Between January and March, I received so many warnings from friends and colleagues all over the world. I read the news. I was served hand sanitizer in a pub, and I travelled in a train full of masked people. So why did it take me so much time to realize that the pandemic was real? Did I really need a thermometer in my forehead to get the grip with reality? Standing in that queue at Zagreb airport, I remembered a movie scene in which a well-dressed elderly gentleman comfortably queues in front of gates of Auschwitz and explains, to no-one in particular, that things are going to be just fine. I cannot remember which movie the scene is from, but I vividly remember that I wanted to scream at the screen: How can you be so

stupid? Can't you see that they are taking you to a concentration camp? Watching the movie, I judged that fictional character's naivety and short-sightedness – yet now, it struck me, my reaction to the pandemic was exactly the same. Perhaps the movie character knew that he would not return alive from Auschwitz and subconsciously chose denial as a psychological defence against an inevitable reality? Perhaps I already knew that the pandemic was real, but subconsciously decided to ignore all the warnings because I wanted to visit my friends and my brother in the UK? Once again, life gave me a Biblical lesson: Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

Finally, I took my lesson seriously. I arrived home from the airport, sat with my partner over a glass of wine, and said: we need to take action. We went into voluntary self-isolation. We made arrangements for our son, work, and parents. We shopped for one month's worth of food. We locked ourselves in. We were ready. My parents, my partner's parents and many friends thought we were crazy. I was coming from the future; they still lived in the past. In a recent article, Liz Jackson describes finding herself in a similar situation:

Two months ago, in Hong Kong, there was food hoarding, toilet paper hoarding, and grabbing up of all face masks and sanitizer. We went from spectators of the situation in Wuhan to frontliners. Now we see friends and family sharing our experience in Europe, North America, and the UK. (...) Why did not our friends and family listen to us, about social distancing and self-quarantine, about cancelling in-person classes, before things got worse? Did they think they were immune to the problems of Asia? Did they imagine they are in the developed countries, with the best healthcare in the world, while their lead politicians encourage needless loss of life, as apparently necessary for their economies? (Jackson, 2020)

Liz's analysis is spot on: geopolitical, economical, post-colonial and other theoretical perspectives offer a lot to our understanding of people's reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. But I feel that my reaction was much more intimate, emotional, non-theorizable, banal. In 1979, The Clash wrote a song 'A Message to You, Rudy' about a proverbial London rude boy that describes my behaviour better than any theory: 'First, you must cure your temper / Then you find a job in a paper' (Clash, 1979). In spite of all my education, travel, intellectual openness, anti-colonial and anti-racist attitudes, and what-not, I recognized the threat only when a masked person pushed a pink hard object into my forehead. Behind all the intellectual glazing acquired by decades in academia, I guess I'm still just a Rudy.

Rudy Can't Fail

In February, Michael Peters emailed Peter McLaren and me with an idea to co-author an article on the pandemic. At that point, Michael was coming from the future – and I was living in the past. As the three of us slowly developed the first

paper about viral modernity (Peters, Jandrić & McLaren, 2020), and then the second paper about a viral theory of post-truth (Peters, McLaren, & Jandrić, 2020), my theoretical interest started to pique. After the thermometer incident, however, my theoretical interest flipped into a very personal experience. As soon as I had a free afternoon, I sat down and wrote an urgent editorial for *Postdigital Science and Education* that concluded:

I invite all postdigital scholars to take this voice seriously, get out of our comfort zones, and explore all imaginable aspects of this large social experiment that the COVID-19 pandemic has lain down in front of us. In the midst of the pandemic, many of these efforts may seem useless. Yet paraphrasing John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1966), those who dare to fail miserably are also those who might change the course of history. (Jandrić, 2020, p. 237)

Then I issued several calls: for 500-word testimonies, for shorter commentary articles, for full-length original articles.... Some of these calls went viral, at least by academic standards: within six weeks, I received submissions by more than 130 people. Slowly but surely, other journals started issuing similar calls. My name was out there early, so I received many invites. Two months after Michael invited me to co-author the first paper on COVID-19, this is my seventh or eighth COVID-themed article; I have also edited a related issue of *Postdigital Science and Education*; and I have prepared a book that should be out in autumn.

‘Rudy likes [t]o be seen lookin’ cool an’ speckles’ (Clash, 1979), yet this bragging about my own projects has a deeper purpose – it reveals deep links between my research on the COVID-19 pandemic and my personal journey through the pandemic. As an academic editor, I launched calls for papers that I would now phrase differently. As an academic writer, my papers from only one month ago sent very different messages than this paper. In my editorial, I did foresee this development, writing:

Wearing my academic researcher hat, I am not ashamed of naivety of this paper – it honestly represents my current thoughts and feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic on 16 March 2020. These thoughts are likely to be overridden by new developments, but they will nevertheless serve as a testimony of this historical moment. (Jandrić, 2020, p. 237)

Yet this article is not about shaming academics who dare to change their mind, or about the historical value of research produced during the pandemic. It is about the curious dance of reason, instinct and emotion that characterizes our reality.

From Slavoj Žižek’s book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (2020) (published, amazingly, only three months into the pandemic) to the COVID-related articles published all around the web, people seem to be putting more than a fair share of emotion into their research. In a recent article, I made the case for exploring this question through the lens of social epistemology (Jandrić, 2020b). I also think that we should take into account personal epistemologies, and then

studies of inspiration and creativity – especially as they relate to collective intelligences (Peters, 2015). My realization of the pandemic came through a profoundly uncanny feeling, which has already been theorized in sociomaterialist (Bayne, 2010) and postdigital contexts (Jandrić & Kuzmanić, 2020), and which requires further attention. And latest work on the continuum of enchantment, disenchantment and re-enchantment (Reader et al., 2020) seems to be of special relevance for the ‘wao!’ moment of realization that, in my case, came into being at the moment of physical contact between my forehead and a pink hard object. While there is nothing inherently new in the fact that our philosophies and sciences are borne from a mix of reason, instinct and emotion, the COVID-19 pandemic is a historically unprecedented practical case for exploring this mix.

‘Rudy can’t fail’ (The Clash, 1979) – not because he is invincible, but because he does not see his rude and reckless behaviour as being problematic. In the same sardonic sense, our rude-boy philosophies and sciences also can’t fail – not because they provide us with best results, but because their lack of sensitivity to instinct and emotion is not perceived as a problem. This article’s main takeaway is the importance of the question: Why did it take me so much time to realize that the pandemic is real? Cutting across the personal and the collective, the uncanny and the ordinary, the visceral and the rational, this article shows that our philosophies’ and our sciences’ lack of sensitivity to instinct and emotion is a problem. In the face of predictable future challenges such as new pandemics, environmental decay, and others, the COVID-19 pandemic tells us: ‘Stop your messing around / Better think of your future’ (The Clash, 1979). This message clearly points towards the inclusion of instinct and emotion into our philosophies and sciences. I may be a Rudy, but I intend to take that message seriously.

NOTE

1. This title paraphrases the famous adage is from Benjamin Franklin’s work *Poor Richard* (1744/1961):

IV Mon. June hath xxx days.

Of all the Causes which conspire to blind
Man’s erring Judgment, and misguide the Mind,
What the weak Head with strongest Biass rules,
Is *Pride*, that never-failing Vice of Fools.
Whatever Nature has in Worth deny’d,
She gives in large Recruits of needful *Pride*;
For as in Bodies, thus in Souls we find
What wants in Blood and Spirits, swell’d with Wind.

Hear *Reason*, or she’ll make you feel her.

Give me yesterday’s Bread, this Day’s Flesh, and last Year’s Cyder. (Franklin, 1744/1961)

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