

# “The Coronavirus: the Root of the Problem Extends Far Beyond Wet Markets in China and Bush-Meat Markets in Africa”

By Gil Bartholeyns<sup>1</sup>

How did we get here: the loss of parents and colleagues, avoiding each other, suspecting [infection from] doorknobs, collectively renouncing what has been the foundation of our societies for the last 200 years (individual liberty) and, in Europe, for the last several decades (freedom of movement)? In our latitudes, air traffic fell 90 percent in March. For the last two months, the town has become a long “day without cars.” Bears have ventured into residential areas, penguins have crossed streets and lions have taken naps on golf courses. All this is unprecedented. Why do I have to die in my turn, even as part of a downward curve [in the rate of infection]? A sophist would say that this only happens to other people, except when it happens to you. How did we get here? How do we not return to this same place, again and again?

It is with eyes squinting with disgust that people are mentioning the wet markets in Asia and the bush-meat markets in Africa where live turtles are cut up in the midst of caged birds, severed monkey hands and bags of pangolin scales that are sold for 100 Euros per 100 grams. SARS-CoV-2 came from such menageries, as did Ebola and Nipah. But there are also livestock farms. If the origins of *zoonoses*<sup>2</sup> and epizootic diseases are always complicated, livestock farms are involved in the overwhelming majority of cases. The Spanish Flu probably came from large North American farmyards. The H1N1 virus came directly from combinations<sup>3</sup> within hog farms, no matter if the hypothesis is that these farms were located in China or Mexico. Bird Flu H5N1, which presents a major risk of causing a pandemic, first appeared in large poultry farms, was then transmitted in Europe and Africa by eggs incubated in Turkey or chicks raised in China, and affected wildlife all along the [intervening] commercial routes. The outbreak of Swine Flu of 2019 led to the slaughter of thousands of wild boars and millions of pigs, which was intended to protect the livestock farms, and yet the disease was spread [directly] by contaminated meat or by the intermediaries of farmhands and animals imported for hunting purposes. These weren't accidents, but the results of a systematic cycle that tends to get worse as time goes on. Of the roughly 300 illnesses that have emerged in the last sixty years, 60 percent have been *zoonoses*, and the number of epidemics has increased fivefold during that period of time.

What is to be done? When it comes to wild animals, we must of course ban transporting, selling and consuming them. The craze<sup>4</sup> for exotic pets such as iguanas, cockatoos and opossum is only the superfluous result of the presence and intermingling of non-native species within the centers of our cities. More profoundly, we must restore the empty spaces [*espaces sans compagnie*] and decolonize the already fractured ecosystems. In a single phrase: live and let live.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gil Bartholeyns, “Ensemble mais séparément,” published in *Lundi Matin* #243, 18 May 2020. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 23 May 2020. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> Diseases that are naturally transmittable from animals to human beings.

<sup>3</sup> Areas in which both crops and animals are raised.

<sup>4</sup> The word used here, *engouement*, can also mean “appetite.”

As for livestock farming: it must be abolished. Because it is too easy at this point to find practical reason on a single pandemic, to speak of unnatural mixtures, to say that other people have degenerate food choices, to go so far as to invent soups made out of whole bats.<sup>5</sup> To reduce all of China to a nation of dog-eaters. There is no difference rabbit stew and a cat cooked on a spit. It is also too simple to hide behind anti-poaching measures and only protecting endangered species. Why? First of all because their consumption only represents a tiny part of those animals subjected to abuse. And also because – let us say it again – pandemics (and not only pandemics) have their origins in livestock farms, and not just the intensive or industrial ones. They gain strength in farming operations in which the animals are immuno-compromised and are forced to live with illness that are classified as systemic by law.

This goes for viruses, but also for bacteria. There is an antibiotic that is called colistin: it is administered when no other antibiotic is effective and only as a last recourse because it is toxic. At livestock farms, antibiotics are routinely administered to the animals (until 2006 in Europe, but this is not the global norm) because they are powerful growth agents. In 2015, researchers discovered Chinese hog farms in which the bio-resistance of the E. Coli bacteria to colistin, already increasingly used everywhere, had crossed a critical threshold; the researchers did so by no longer focusing upon the bacteria's chromosomes, which limited its transmission to cellular reproduction, but upon the plasmid, a[n extrachromosomal DNA] molecule that has the ability to be transmitted rapidly between different species of bacteria.

The economic fear of transatlantic treaties should be coupled with a health-related fear. More than 80 percent of North American poultry carry E. Coli pathogens, salmonella and/or Campylobacters – that is, these results are found every time that an independent body, not fearing death threats, analyzes the chicken filets available at the supermarkets. A triple cross-contamination is involved here: 1) in the unscreened livestock farms, from the fertilization of eggs to the slaughter of the animals; 2) due to collective scalding (in sinks designed to facilitate easy plucking); and 3) due to immersion in cooling basins that become fecal pools because evisceration is never perfect. And so, if the situation in French-speaking Belgium, for example, is almost “pastoral” compared to the farm conditions in some of the neighboring countries, then Europe is much better than the United States, the United States is better than Brazil and Brazil is better than China. If Dante described the nine circles of Hell, he must have forgotten a few in the process. If at the beginning of the 19th century the slaughterhouses were removed from the town centers, this wasn't because the cries of the beasts became intolerable to the city-dwellers, but for preventive reasons: to guard against the incessant coming and going of the animals, the accidents, the blood-soaked streets, and the flammable tallow. The side effects were the neglect of the cattle themselves and, due to concentration and intensification, the creation of conditions for the emergence of health-related explosions.

What is troubling is the level at which human history is now being played out. These invisible [microscopic] creatures, who are far more numerous than we are, who live next to us and in us (most often to our advantage) – these creatures force us to see that our global cultural customs have immense consequences at the biological level and that all forms of life on earth are affected by them. They, too, are subjected to the leap across species.<sup>6</sup> They are neither good nor

---

<sup>5</sup> Not just the meat. Cf. Jerry Hopkins, *Extreme Cuisine: The Weird and Wonderful Foods that People Eat* (Periplus Editions, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> It is said that the current pandemic is the result of the leap of a virus from one species to another.

bad; they don't even want to kill because their very existence depends on the good health of their hosts. Richard Dawkins<sup>7</sup> has said that the gene is the big winner [of evolutionary progress] and that consciousness, that epiphenomenon, is only there to register this fact.

Human beings are sick because of animals, but the animals are also very sick because of human beings. The salmonella bacterium poisons us, but salmonellosis was, historically speaking, an illness transmitted by human beings to domesticated animals, before it became endemic in the livestock farms. The “crisis of the mad cow” was a health-related scandal emblematic of the end of the 20th century, and there, too, everything began with an appalling mixture and unnatural living conditions: meal made from cows was fed to cows and they died from it and an illness fatal to human beings emerged.

And so, what is to be done? What is required? The anthropologist Frédéric Keck explains that Asia has been in 2020-type conditions ever since the outbreak of the SARS epidemic of 2003.<sup>8</sup> And Europe, until recently the land of the official history of the world, is astonished: “us, too?”<sup>9</sup> Europe forgets that, in its path to empire, the plague followed the route of the silk trade, with Florence and London losing 50 percent of their populations in a year. The years 1300-1320 are rightly considered to be the culminating point of an era that Fernand Braudel has described as the “first modernity.”<sup>10</sup> It was full to the bursting point, inflationary, mercantile like never before. The first globalized virus would follow the clamor of imperialism step by step and it was, above all, intra-specific: human beings decimated other human beings by coming into contact with them. The anecdote about Hernán Cortés offering blankets infected by smallpox and typhus is infamous.<sup>11</sup> Each time, geographical barriers were breached and the impermeability of the local ecosystems (a precondition for biotic balance) was undermined.

In the biblical narrative of the world's origins that was composed by the men of Semitic culture living in Egypt first and then in Babylon – which were the first lands of agriculture and animal husbandry – living creatures were created and lived “each according to their species.” This is curious, but profound. Admittedly, this principle was accompanied by the disastrous injunctions to fill the earth [with people], to subdue it, and to dominate all the animals of the sea, the sky and the land (Genesis 1:28). But let us momentarily take this principle as a wise intuition. We will then see that it is formulated or practiced pretty much everywhere. In the Amazon, the

---

<sup>7</sup> A British biologist and the author of *The Selfish Gene* (1976), translated into French by Julie Pavési and Nadine Chaptal as *Le nouvel esprit biologique* (1980).

<sup>8</sup> *Author's note*: Frédéric Keck, *Avian Reservoirs* (Duke University Press, 2020); [translated as] *Les sentinelles des pandémies* (Zones Sensibles, 2020), available as soon as the book-distribution chain is restarted.

<sup>9</sup> It seems to me that, at this point, the author begins to stray from his central thesis, which concerned the relationship between human beings and animals, and not the relationship between people in Europe and people in the so-called Third World.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme – xv<sup>e</sup> et xviii<sup>e</sup> siècles* (1967), translated as *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century* by Siân Reynolds (1979).

<sup>11</sup> And perhaps apocryphal: though the Spanish did indeed infect the Aztecs with these heretofore unknown European diseases (circa 1520), it appears that this was done accidentally and that the *deliberate* infection of Native Americans via the distribution of tainted blankets was perpetrated by British soldiers during the Siege of Fort Pitt (1763).

people of the forests kept themselves at a distance from the bats and the White Man<sup>12</sup> and observed a whole series of measures that, in the final analysis, reveal an eco-philosophy that works against *disruption*<sup>13</sup> and the porosity of the habitats.

And so: what to do? What to demand? Nothing if not a moratorium on animal products. Nothing if not the creation of a jurisdiction to judge crimes of ecocide or, as some people recommend, to make environmental crimes and, even further, crimes against life the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. It is no longer a question of knowing if someone is a species bigot [*spéciste*] or pro-animal [*animalist*]. Contemporary humanism is a humanitarianism for all living creatures. “The rights of humanity,” Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote in 1983, “cease at the precise moment in which their exercise puts the existence of another species into danger. Only the right to life [...] can be called inalienable,” and this right is “a right of the environment over mankind and not a right of mankind over the environment.”<sup>14</sup> The eating of meat is perhaps good; it is perhaps rooted in our culture, in the family.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps a requirement (“because it is in our nature”) or the proof that we do indeed dominate the food chain and that we have won out over it. But we must stop eating animals or run the risk of dying and making others die as well. The direction of the actions to take towards animals and to repair the world can be summarized by these words: *together, but separately*. Isn’t it eloquent that the new emoticon on Facebook, a smiley face hugging a heart, which appeared on 17 April so that each person can express his or her solidarity, was presented to its users along with these words: “separate, but together”?

---

<sup>12</sup> *Author’s note*: Els Lagrou, “*Nisun* : A vingança do povo morcego e o que ele pode nos ensinar sobre o novo coronavírus,” *BVPS*:

<https://jornalistaslivres.org/nisun-a-vinganca-do-povo-morcego-e-o-que-ele-pode-nos-ensinar-sobre-o-novo-coronavirus/>. [*Translator*: Els Lagrou: “*Nisun*: the Revenge of the Bat People and What it Can Teach Us about the Coronavirus,” published by the *Blog da Biblioteca Virtual do Pensamento Social*, 14 April 2020.]

<sup>13</sup> In French, the word *dislocation* can also mean “separation” or “dispersion.”

<sup>14</sup> *Author’s note*: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Regard éloigné*, Paris, Plon, 1983 p. 374-375. [*Translator*: translated into English as *The View From Afar* by Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss (1985).]

<sup>15</sup> Daddy “brings home the bacon.”