



HAL
open science

The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Reflection of the Human Adventure in the Anthropocene

Renaud Hétier, Nathanaël Wallenhorst

► **To cite this version:**

Renaud Hétier, Nathanaël Wallenhorst. The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Reflection of the Human Adventure in the Anthropocene. *Paragrana - Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie*, 2021, 30 (2), pp.41-52. <10.1515/para-2021-0023>. <halshs-04251567>

HAL Id: halshs-04251567

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04251567v1>

Submitted on 27 Oct 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Hétier, R., Wallenhorst, N. (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic: a reflection of the human adventure in the Anthropocene. *Paragrana*, pp. 41-52.

Renaud Hétier/Nathanaël Wallenhorst

The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Reflection of the Human Adventure in the Anthropocene

Abstract

The covid-19 crisis is testing human societies. It is obviously first and foremost a health problem - it causes deaths and numerous diseases - but it is also an economic problem - it is expensive, it weighs on the usual economic functioning - and finally, it is a hindrance to freedom - circulation, sociality, vaccination, etc. - and to the development of the human condition. This crisis highlights the interdependence between the environment, the economy and freedom, and reveals our condition and its future.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic raises questions both old – such as how to deal with such a phenomenon (a question which has arisen since at least the time of the Black Death) – and new – where does the right balance lie between individual freedom and economic ‘survival’, on the one hand, and the protection of life and solidarity with other generations on the other? Our values, our choices as a society, and indeed our ‘living standards’ and way of living are put to the test. In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic is revealing not only the state of humanity grappling with their environment (to which they have caused immense harm), but also a fate that is in the process of coming about. Thus, we must consider the necessity of wide-reaching restrictions, in light of which it is no longer sensible to speak of a ‘crisis’ as though it were something temporary which we can pass through and come out the other side – the reality is that in our times we are seeing irreversible changes. Our unlimited energy consumption which gives us comfort and also enables us to enjoy innumerable goods and services, under the auspices of a very human idea of ‘freedom’, is ultimately incompatible with life itself: life is drained, or at least threatened, by our energy consumption. Hence, we not only need to make choices in terms of the tangible and material, but re-examine the very meaning that we attach to a meaningful life.

1. An all-too-human disease?

COVID-19 is, of course, not the first pandemic that history has seen, but there are a number of aspects which mark it as unique. It once again raises questions for our advanced societies, and finally, it reveals and precipitates something that is a part of our new destiny: the Anthropocene Epoch.

Whilst not yet determined beyond doubt, the disease seems to have emerged from close contact between humans and animals. From this standpoint, it is one more on the long list of epidemics and pandemics that have occurred since the Neolithic Age, as a result of the close contact between animal species as a result of livestock farming. Consider the horrifying rampage of the Plague, notably in Europe – it was brought to Marseille by Genoese sailors in 1347 and rapidly spread across the continent through trade routes. Once again, it was proximity – this time, between human populations, that decimated the indigenous populations of South America, when European settlers arrived, bringing diseases that had never before been seen on that continent. *Homo sapiens* are undeniably conquerors, if only in terms of conquering territory. Everywhere we go, we bring our germs with us and expose ourselves to new germs when we encounter new environments. It can be said that by ‘spilling over’ and encroaching on nature (e.g., the domestication of animals, but also the unrestrained consumption of meat), humanity is, in turn, invaded by nature. In a different way, it may also be the case with megaviruses released by the melting of permafrost. In this, the COVID-19 pandemic is symptomatic of the Anthropocene: it is the result of

humans putting pressure on all natural environments, and intermingling – now on a global scale – of all life forms, including bacteria and viruses.

In addition, we cannot fail to be struck by the speed at which the virus spread around the globe – in only a few weeks. It was all the more striking, given that scientists – in particular, Chinese scientists – alerted the international community to the potential danger and the media broadcast the information widely. That is to say, we saw the disaster coming, but were nevertheless unable to take effective preventative action. Thus, we see a paradox: an unprecedented level of care was taken over hygiene measures and disease prevention, identification of pathogens, etc., but it was enormously difficult to impact the spread of a simple virus. Thus, the pandemic reveals a certain general state of the world in which we live, subject to massive acceleration, notably due to the intensive globalisation of trade, and the attending circulation of individuals, leading to a disconcerting situation: disasters, rather than ‘falling from the sky’ on the heads of a human race who are blind and resigned to their fate, are entirely predictable – particularly when they are *caused* by human activities. There is a sort of irrepressible snowball effect which means we are, nevertheless, unable to prevent it. It is not that the pandemic moved too quickly – it is the world we have built, our way of living, which is speeding humanity towards its own destruction.

While the threat is a global one, the responses to it and the means of political and health management need to be analysed on a case-by-case basis. The pandemic has put whole societies to the test: their healthcare system, the state of health of their population, how they are managed by the government, the discipline of the populations, and obviously, the resilience of their economies. On the first point, a major difference came to light between France and Germany – in particular, in relation to the number of ICU beds, and we began to examine the issue of importation of basic medicine and also our dependency on China in this regard. On the second point, we know that the majority of victims are over 75 years old, obese or suffering from cardiovascular diseases. From this point of view, a continent with a young population and little incidence of obesity, such as Africa, which it was feared would be severely struck at any moment and lack the means to defend against this new danger, is far better able to withstand the effects of the virus than others. In terms of political management, the United States and Brazil offer tragically compelling examples. Certainly, these two countries have enormous population figures (though far smaller than those of China and India) and suffered record numbers of corona virus deaths. These distressing outcomes are plainly connected to a type of general “negationism” on the part of their leaders, who downplayed the seriousness of the epidemic (and that of climate change), actively going against the decisions made elsewhere and spreading a sense of invulnerability (and with it, irresponsibility) to a portion of the population. Finally, and this is a point which we shall revisit later on, the pandemic’s economic impact is absolutely unprecedented in the Modern Age, starkly demonstrating that our businesses, which tend to run at a constant and frenetic pace, may suddenly grind to a halt and collapse.

COVID-19 also shines a light on the inequalities in our societies – inequities which the pandemic may also help to reinforce. China is making its economic power felt all over the world. Official communication from the Chinese Government explains to the world that China has been better able to contain the pandemic than have other countries, which has given it the means to increase its domination over other regions whose economy has been extremely hard hit by the protective measures. In an emergency situation, democracies do not seem to be able to respond as effectively as an authoritarian regime. Of course, this observation raises the broader question of the discipline that is required of us to deal with the climate situation. The pandemic’s undeniable impact on western economies, which are heavily dependent on a certain degree of social mobility (which leads to constant intermingling), also exposes their vulnerability. By a certain irony of fate, it is the most ‘advanced’ societies which are the most exposed, as though this pandemic were an affliction that is specific to our hypermodernity. Furthermore, it is a certain type of humans who, through science and technology, seek to step away from the natural world, considering themselves to be ‘removed’ from it or above it, holding off death, who are brutally reminded of their own vulnerability. This can be understood in a number of different ways: bodily vulnerability (that of many patients suffering the illness – not just those who died from it), economic vulnerability, but also the fragility of a certain social existence. On this latter point, the experience of lockdown for certain people was one of being torturously *imprisoned* (in their healthcare institution, their tower block, their family or their romantic attachment, for example), sometimes resulting in violence and depression, disengagement with school, or screen addiction. For *homo sapiens*, inhabiting the Earth is plainly not

the same as living in a sanctuary and far less an underground bunker, sheltering in an attempt to *survive* a world that is becoming violently hostile.

2. Human beings kept apart

COVID-19 affects different generations to varying degrees and strains the relationship between them. Not all societies have always been kind to the elderly, who are sometimes thought of as a burden: unproductive, and therefore useless. However, one of the characteristics of modern society is the invention of mass sacrifice on the part of young people (here, we are not talking about ritual sacrifice, which is relatively economical in terms of lives lost). In international wars, and specifically, the two World Wars, it was the younger generations who laid down their lives at the front, for reasons decided upon by the generation before. Even today, professional soldiers are young. The current pandemic could resonate as a kind of ‘revenge’: finally, the balance has been restored – it is the old and the elderly who are dying, and young people can draw strength from their spontaneous feeling of invulnerability. This is particularly meaningful when we consider that adolescents and young adults are especially social. They see no reason to avoid socialising, even at the risk of transmitting the virus.

This time, the pandemic negatively impacts our situation in the Anthropocene. As Greta Thunberg has demonstrated through her activism, it is the youngest among us – the children and adolescents of today – who will be sacrificed, live shorter lives, in worsened, even dreadful, or even lethal conditions (as the heat waves to come will surely be). We know that this degradation of our environment is linked to a set of human activities of production and consumption, and to the population boom since the 1950s, which has seen those activities ramp up. In other words, it is those who are now old who have made the most significant contribution to this degradation (and continue to do so), enjoying limitless ‘progress’ which, up until recently, may have seemed indefinite. However, the idea of progress is deceptive. This is not to say that real progress has not been made in many areas (technology being only one of them): the living standards of a broad section of the world population have greatly improved in recent decades (Pinker 2018). However, the form of that progress is debatable – for example, in certain regions, it has driven people from their former poverty into genuine destitution (Rahnema 2003). It is also unsustainable. It is somewhat like a marathon runner continually increasing his speed, so that by the 10th mile, he is running at 30mph. This makes it impossible for him to *stay the course*. Just like it inevitably would for the marathon runner, the growth our societies are experiencing can only lead, inevitably, to a melt-down. In addition, it is doubtful that when the runner passes the baton, his successor would be able to sustain the same speed. Again, it is the younger generation who will pay the price: there is a certain disregard for the future (of others), in favour of pleasure and comfort in the here and now.

This intergenerational break, which may also explain why certain young people rebelled against the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, is not the only fissure. In 2019, the actions of the so-called ‘*gilets jaunes*’ demonstrated the reaction of a segment of the population to a certain social fragmentation and the feeling that residents of peri-urban and rural areas had been left behind. However, with the constraints aimed at containing the COVID-19 pandemic, new barriers are being erected. During the lockdown, it was particularly hard to cope with the isolation in cramped living conditions and/or with no garden. There are also major differences between professional groups. Remote working is a possibility in so-called ‘higher’-level and administrative professions, but not those which require a physical effort (which, of course, includes the healthcare profession). Continuing with this reasoning, we can see that for some, the lockdown and subsequent restrictions create social division (notably, with the prospect of mass unemployment), while for others, they represent an opportunity, so to speak. Indeed, for the lucky few, who have an outdoor space, a spacious home, who can work from home, who have the means to fund their children’s education, etc., the pandemic can even be construed as an opportunity. It brings the prospect of a new quality of life, less urban, less stuffed with constant motion, conducted at a more human pace, more economical and more eco-friendly – in short, an early manifestation of the types of measures that could be taken in view of our entry into the Anthropocene – taken, that is, by those who can afford to take them.

This pandemic reveals numerous divisions between human beings, already being reflected in ways of living which are more or less compatible with an increasingly hostile environment, with the prospect of a life partly *secluded*. This term can be interpreted in two senses: firstly, the sacrificing of certain liberties and a certain enjoyment, and secondly, a life lived on the defensive, almost constantly on the lookout for the rise of new threats. Digital communication undoubtedly has a leading role to play in

these conditions, maintaining social contact even when physically distant. However, beyond the virtualisation of exchanges, the possibilities and conditions of the seclusion are markers of inequality – and growing inequality, at that. In keeping with the model of gated communities that are growing in number in countries such as Brazil, the logic of seclusion, which we saw at work during the epidemic, will surely spread and intensify in the Anthropocene. Those choosing to shut themselves away in this manner will want to defend themselves from other people (such as climate migrants), but also from the environment itself (investment in regions least vulnerable to global warming, in homes that are adequately thermally insulated, with sustainable self-sufficiency capabilities, etc.). Ultimately, there is the risk of a situation comparable to that described by Michel Houellebecq in *The Possibility of an Island* (2005): a group of ‘neo-humans’ (who could also be described as Noah-humans), transferring their consciousness into new clones of themselves to cheat death, living apart from humanity which has been decimated and is ill, fearful and reduced to wandering and a form of ferality.

3. A relationship with a degenerate world

The prospect outlined above – of a ‘grand separation’ of humanity – is undeniably based on fiction, and is speculative. That is not where we are at. Also, at this distance, the prospect may appear an unlikely one. However, climatologists are warning that even in the space of a few decades, the conditions of habitability of Earth will be massively degraded, and potentially catastrophic by the year 2100 (Wallenhorst 2019, 2020). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic places us in a vulnerable position even today and raises awareness of that vulnerability. In fact, though, rather than focus on our physical vulnerability (notably that of the frailest among us), we need to analyse our socio-economic vulnerability – it must be understood that this socio-economic vulnerability is a systemic, global vulnerability, in view of the crucial role the economy plays in our societies.

Within this article, we obviously cannot fully analyse the importance of the economy in our societies, or the capitalist system, as Marx did. However, we can attempt to clearly and briefly define that importance. There is no society without economy. Even in the most restrained societies, there are still occasional exchanges with other groups, and within a clan, there is a certain set of guidelines regulating reciprocal giving of gifts, as Marcel Mauss demonstrated. There does not need to be currency and capital in order for economic links to form between groups and individuals. The goal in economic exchanges is invariably ‘enrichment’, but not primarily in terms of hoarding, but in human terms: taking or receiving something from someone else, and gaining some resources by losing others. Through these exchanges, human beings display their *dependence* on others, and to a degree, their commitment to others.

At the very least, we can say that hypermodern individuals have an ambivalent attitude towards their dependency, as was notably shown by Joan Tronto in *Un monde vulnérable*. It is even a type of game on the part of ‘urban’ individuals to show themselves to be, and believe themselves, ‘independent’, in the sense of being strong, enterprising, autonomous, etc. – the idea of ‘having need of no-one’. ‘Dependency’, in the social sense of the word, is a term that is deliberately reserved for the elderly (for example, in French, an old folks’ home is known as an ‘EHPAD’, with the D standing for ‘*dépendantes*’). However, when faced with disease, everyone is rudely reminded of their vulnerability and their extreme dependency on others – the same is true even for people with power. However, not everybody draws the same lessons from the experience. Consider Boris Johnson, on the one hand, for whom hospitalisation with COVID-19 seems to have awakened his awareness of the seriousness of the condition; consider Donald Trump, on the other, for whom nothing happened, so to speak (other than a divine revelation of the power of the treatment he was given, and could administer to all Americans if re-elected...). Yet the situation we face in the Anthropocene would certainly fall under this analysis: the fragilisation and deterioration of Earth’s inhabitability reveals firstly that our environment depends on us, and secondly that we are completely dependent upon it. Once again, humanity is faced with Darwin’s theory: however great our pride, our sense of self-satisfaction, however large our salaries, imposing our homes and powerful our cars, like all living organisms, we cannot escape the degradation of living conditions on Earth. This dependency is no longer simply moral – we no longer need to think of it only in relation to other people, as is the case with the ethics of care... but instead, in relation to a global, complex environment – one which is surely unique in the universe – that surrounds us and supports us as living beings.

Behind the denial of dependency, in psychoanalytic terms, we see an infantile attitude, displayed by certain people who are contemptuous of the for-profit, speculative capitalist system. Small children who are completely dependent on others believe that others *want* to serve them and therefore that they are in a position of omnipotence (as indicated by Rousseau (1966) in *Émile*): it is other people (notably, their parents) who have need of the child, but they themselves believe they need no-one. In economic terms, we find such a stance in neoliberalism, as theorised by the Mont Pélérin Society and implemented by Reagan and Thatcher, claiming that, so to speak, people do not have need of the State (and its protection); that (in Thatcher's own words), 'there's no such thing as society' – there are only individuals, destined to be radically free (provided they are strong enough). The combination of these two dimensions is so worrying that it is difficult even to imagine: the individuals who have achieved greatest success, the most powerful, the most 'impressive', are also the most violently regressive. From their position 'at the top', they ultimately keep everybody else down.

To what extent is such a system, and its proponents, implicated in the COVID-19 pandemic and the destruction of Earth's habitability? Undoubtedly, it is not by chance that the current figureheads of ultraliberalism, in the United States and Brazil, are also the leaders who have handled the pandemic most negligently, and whose countries have the highest death tolls. Individuals' economic 'comfort' is always held to be more important than constraints for the purpose of solidarity (in a society worthy of the name). The infantile attitude of these figures (narcissism, egocentrism, refusal to listen to reason, changeability, and general immaturity) shines a light on the relationship between infantilism and a certain delight in power highlighted above. The same people, beyond scepticism of climate change, indulge in veritable negationism, reject scientific evidence out of hand, espouse bizarre beliefs, and deny the facts themselves (in relation to forest fires, for example). These leaders simply take to the flash point a tendency that is characteristic of the system from which they benefit: for-profit and speculative capitalism. This system represents an economy which not only runs 'for its own benefit' (that is, to make profit, rather than to serve needs), characterised by its systematic blindness to the real, long-term cost and consequences of the profits made. The simple fact that the use of limited resources, upon which that system is founded, has always been a sort of 'speculative bubble' is denied, and it seems impossible to get off the economic machine, or even to slow it down, without immediately causing a general meltdown. In a way, it is the fear (and the threat) of such a meltdown that is driving us, full steam ahead, into a perfectly predictable lockdown: that of the ecosystems on which our biosphere depends. In this, we certainly do see general infantilism, which is equivalent to denial of reality.

Though seemingly occurring in parallel to the phenomena described above (a psychological regression which aims to harness the economy to serve individual pleasures and cares nothing for the destructive consequences; Hétier 2021), the virtualisation of the world is, in fact, closely intertwined with them. At first glance, it seems to be a set of merely technological solutions – 'neutral', in a manner of speaking; simply *practical*. It was extremely welcome during lockdown, and in its wake (with the major increase in remote working and videoconferencing). What might lockdown have looked like without the ability to communicate and work remotely – for example, in a flat with no garden, with children at home. *De facto*, virtualisation offers a *response* to the need to withdraw from bodily interactions (which have become a source of danger), and this is actually the latest instalment in a long history of distancing from the bodily experience. In hypermodern societies, and especially in France, it is wise to 'keep your distance'.

To begin with, we can see that the lockdown and the virtualisation of a portion of day-to-day activities had decreased CO₂ production. Indeed, the tangible decrease in the use of transport, notably, of course had an impact on that production. However, as far as we are aware, there has been no calculation of the surplus energy consumed as a result of the massively increased demand for digital services (and we know this expenditure is enormous: viewing a single video is equivalent to the energy consumption of an electric light bulb over the course of a year). Finally, when lockdown ended and people were released, things began to add up again: transport gradually returned to normal levels (except for air travel), but the demand for digital continued to grow; some proof of this can be found in the unquestioning adoption of 5G in France. Most human beings – who already consume more fossil energy than the earth can sustainably provide and thus produce more emissions than the biosphere can absorb – appear to be blinded by a demand for ever-increasing amounts of energy. Thus, in an 'advanced' and informed country such as France, SUV sales are skyrocketing, irrespective of the horrendous consequences for the environment. Bigger, louder, faster, etc. – our demand is marked by the + and > signs, even at a time when, most plainly, we should be going the other way.

Finally, let us consider the virtualisation of our way of interacting with the world. Indeed, it is not only other people and pathogens that are being kept at a distance: it is the world itself. Interacting and communicating remotely ‘works’, and as *Homo sapiens*, we are particularly sensitive to that, as we are creatures of language. However, even in this type of communication that ‘works’ we may legitimately wonder whether there is a shortcoming, stemming perhaps from the lack of bodily interaction, the inability to engage fully in intersubjectivity in the philosophical sense. Human beings crave relationships which go beyond mere communication, involving a certain responsibility towards one another, which manifests in physical, bodily presence. Going further still, a series of phenomena come to light – for example, the voracious appetite of children and adolescents (mainly boys) for video games; the rise of cybersex; and for all, the explosion in the number of messages and images on social networks. In these different cases, preference is given to representation over ‘presentation’, and finally, over presence itself. We see the construction of a perfect escape from our reality: i.e., the reality of terrestrial beings, connected to life and death and to their natural environment. What is worrying is the prospect that, in living through images and messages, deriving our satisfaction from such media and revelling in their perfection (any virtual product eliminates the faults inherent in the natural world), we shall *no longer feel* the world in which we live (or no longer be *able* to feel it). Immersion in virtual worlds shields *homo numericus* (which we are becoming) from the reality we see in the physical world: our own degradation. At the same time, it risks robbing us of our motivation to change things by diverting us from our sensory experiences of the world and of that degradation; only by appreciating the situation will we be motivated to fix it.

4. The future of human freedoms

The current aspiration to go digital, and the virtualisation of our experience of the world, relieve us of the need to sully our hands ... by preventing us from seeing what we are continuing to sully elsewhere. It opens up an almost infinite space, which is unique to the virtual world, which appears to be immune to any sort of physical reality (though it is, of course, built on hardware, but ultimately is limited by the software running on that platform). However, that space is not only an ‘alternative space’, as stated above – a space free of the resistance of the real world and the painful experience that all things are limited and finite. Like any investiture of space, like any creation of space, this virtualisation is also a defence mechanism against the passing of time, as Gilbert Durand (1969) showed in relation to the imaginary and imagery. As is well known, it is a feature of human consciousness to be aware of the passage of time, and of our own, inevitable demise, moving ever closer. Our imagination resists such awareness and occupies a space of its own: notably, image space, where things can be *fixed*.

Confronted, as we are today, with a heightened awareness of our own finitude (in addition to our own deaths, the premature deaths of our children and grandchildren, and ultimately the extinction of all humanity and indeed of life itself), the response of the imagination may be all the more powerful. This could account for certain denials, such as those mentioned above, and the transhumanist fantasies which are attracting a great deal of investment. In fact, we no longer know which beat to dance to. The COVID-19 crisis is indicative of this: we can be patient for a certain length of time (a few months of lockdown), but in the longer term, we are overcome by the need for human contact – particularly, contact with our nearest and dearest. Undeniably, the particular difficulty of the temporary nature of the pandemic and the information circulating on the subject is that we cannot possibly know whether the constraints imposed are simply temporary (in which case, we should ‘grit our teeth’ for a time) or whether we should get used to the idea that we shall never again be allowed out without a facemask (in which case, we simply need to accept it, like wearing a seatbelt, which eventually became the norm). The psychologically most straining aspect is the absolute uncertainty. Dealing with a ‘long-term emergency’ may exhaust our capacity for resilience and hamper our ability to project ourselves forward in time.

In relation to our exposure to the toxic environment of the Anthropocene, is it not ultimately the same thing, drawn out over a longer period of time? Are we not already facing an emergency that promises to endure in the long term? Though it is already a reality, it is certain to worsen and is here to stay. The difficulty – both mental and physical – of remaining continually alert, being hyper-vigilant in the long term, risks becoming an obstacle to our mobilisation. This can certainly be seen in day-to-day behaviour: everybody is worried about the future as it looks to be, and cannot avoid the thought that the said future has, to some extent, *already begun*, and that we need to reduce our energy consumption now. In fact, it

is as though the world was waiting for something, such as an incontrovertible sign, in addition to the already-palpable heat waves, the frequent flooding, the disappearance of insect species, etc. – we need an event, so to speak, from that future. In order to finally believe in the catastrophe, we are waiting for it to break over us. Our sense of the long term appears still to be marked by an impossibility – the inability to be seriously concerned about something which we will not live to see, as though our own death absolves us of responsibility.

Refusal to acknowledge the passing of time, denial of finitude, the inability to project our minds beyond the limits of our own lives, seem ultimately to prolong a certain resignation, which has long weighed upon humans – reduced to short, eventful and often painful lives, sometimes lived in the hope of a better afterlife. However, this situation has been inverted: human lives have become long, except if cut short by an unforeseen event; we are now able to avoid much of our impoverished ancestors' suffering as a result of all life's vicissitudes, and a huge range of pleasures are constantly made available to us. In this reversal, our earthly lives have taken on a renewed importance, eventually doing away with the expectation of a better life in the hereafter. The trouble is that our 'earthly life' is not actually that down to Earth: it has become highly materialistic (and no longer 'spiritual' in the least), but has largely surpassed the limitations of the earthly plane, as we have advanced – for example, through virtualisation. Our materialism, besides being the cause of the current catastrophe, causes a lack of imagination: not only can we no longer imagine a better life; we can no longer imagine a future life – i.e., the life of others – the lives of generations to come.

This materialism, which spans practically all cultures, irrespective of geographic or age boundaries, is extremely difficult to transcend. Aside from the fact that, by nature, it is the very contrary of transcendence, it is because this attitude, as we know, relates to 'immediate' pleasure. The best life is one that can be lived in the moment, in the here and now, which offers most opportunities for pleasure, even if it means sacrificing a great deal for the hedonistic instantaneous satisfaction. The success of 'secularised' versions (stripped of their religious and spiritual elements) of certain oriental practices, such as meditation, is standing testament to this: in the philosophies attached to such practices, all that matters is the here and now – which, we can surely agree, does not encourage us to accept the responsibility we bear to future generations. However, this way of sacrificing everything for pleasure, as mentioned earlier, at the crossroads between psychology and economics, is coupled with, and masked by, a certain perceived 'value': the value of freedom. This is so to the extent that sometimes freedom and enjoyment are viewed as being one and the same thing (and people 'enjoy' their freedom). Consumerism has been presented as a right, a fundamental freedom, and it is in the name of freedom that individuals may continue to display harmful behaviours which are extremely costly to society and to the environment, though a number of such habits are certainly unnecessary (e.g., smoking, driving a 4×4, jet-skiing, eating meat for every meal, etc.).

The genesis of this idea of freedom is undoubtedly inseparable from the irrepressible rise of individualism; for this reason, the desire for individual freedom is to blame for catastrophic materialistic behaviour, and refusal to abide by constraints linked to the necessary attitude to stem its effects and repair the damage. This idea of freedom has advanced to the point where it actually threatens the survival of life itself. Certainly, it is important to take joy as much as possible, and, of course, to enjoy life. However, it appears that certain people aim to circumvent constraints which, underlying social constraints (which are always open to debate, to a degree), are necessary for life itself. We have already touched on the finitude of a human life, and consequently, the inevitably limited amount of time available to us all. What life requires of us is that – investing nothing of ourselves into life – we give it in this same way that it has been given to us. We cannot – or ought not to be able to – simultaneously live and not wish for life to go on. However, that is what is currently happening and is characteristic of the Anthropocene: we are *consuming* life to the point where we are seriously jeopardising its continuity. Unbounded freedom, insensitive to the needs of any time beyond our own, is the sharpest manifestation of a sort of disregard for the natural world. Such addiction to pleasure risks pitching us over the edge of the abyss, into the complete opposite: into our own annihilation.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is a trial, but a very revealing one. Our strength and our collective resilience are put to the test. The pandemic has forced us to live our lives in very different ways, placing restrictions

on the aspiration of unbridled freedom. It has caused a crisis which could continue for quite some time and appears to herald a state of permanent crisis. What might the Anthropocene look like if the current crisis is immediately succeeded by another, and another, and so on, until the entire system is overcome by a massive crisis which threatens the very existence of life? In addition, we cannot fail to be struck by the economic vulnerability of our societies, which are heavily interdependent on one another and highly reliant on the movement of goods and people. The slowing of the neoliberal characteristic of general circulation with no borders also creates a serious problem which undoubtedly foreshadows the crisis of the future: unless we begin behaving more sensibly, at least for most of us, we shall find ourselves facing new kinds of poverty, which we shall surely experience as a loss of freedom. In fact, the two ‘crises’ are connected. The present ecological crisis will indubitably trigger an economic crisis. Our western style of living will no longer be sustainable and the overpopulated world will begin to run out of resources long before we learn to restrict consumption sufficiently. The only foreseeable potential solution is for politics – i.e., deciding how to live together and continue to do so – to once again become a framework for economic ‘freedom’, rather than allowing freedom to be the expression of regressive, destructive impulses.

References

- Durand, G. (1969): *Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*. Paris 1984: Dunod.
Hétier, R. (2021): *L’humanité contre l’Anthropocène. Résister aux effondrements*. Paris: PUF.
Houellebecq, M. (2005): *La possibilité d’une île*. Paris: Fayard.
Pinker, S. (2018): *Le triomphe des Lumières. Pourquoi il faut défendre la raison, la science et l’humanisme*. Paris: Les Arènes.
Rahnema, M. (2003): *Quand la misère chasse la pauvreté*. Paris: Acte Sud.
Rousseau, J. J. (1966): *Émile ou de l’éducation* (1762). Paris: Garnier-Flammarion.
Tronto, J. (1993): *Un monde vulnérable. Pour une politique du care*. Paris 2009: La Découverte.
Wallenhorst, N. (2019): *L’anthropocène décodé pour les humains*. Paris: Le Pommier.
Wallenhorst, N. (2020): *La vérité sur l’Anthropocène*. Paris: Le Pommier.

Renaud Hétier is Professor at the Catholic University of the West (UCO). He is Doctor of Educational Sciences. He is the author of books on education, and anthropology in the Anthropocene. Books (selection): *Humanity versus Anthropocene* (PUF, 2021, in French); *Cultivating attention and care in education* (PURH, 2020, in French); *Create an educational space with the fairy tales* (Chronique sociale, 2017, in French); *Education between presence and mediation* (L’Harmattan, 2017, in French).

Nathanaël Wallenhorst is Associate Professor at the Catholic University of the West (UCO). He is Doctor of Educational Sciences (Paris 13), Environmental Sciences (Lausanne) and Political Science (Rennes 1). Books (selection): *The Anthropocene decoded for humans* (Le Pommier, 2019, in French). *Educate in Anthropocene* (ed. with Pierron, Le Bord de l’eau 2019, in French). *The Truth about the Anthropocene* (Le Pommier, 2020, in French). *Resistance, resonance - Learn to change the world with Hartmut Rosa* (ed. Le Pommier, 2020, in French). *Dictionary of Prospective Anthropology* (ed. with Wulf, Vrin, forthcoming, in French).