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The »Vocabulary« of Distance

How has ›distance‹ come about? Has there been a transformation of thinking distance? Does its normalization and subsequent normativization announce a paradigmatic shift ›about‹ distance? An important note about the present thematization of ›distance‹ is that it has emerged from observations of sanitary processes, as well as political and institutional decisions made during the 2020 pandemic, including the coercions and restrictions it caused.

We begin thinking distance physically or geographically through the arbitrary 1.5- or 2-meters gap, as physical or geographic space, space between, understanding displacement and occupation of empty spaces in any world that could – but does not have to – have points of overlap. We think distance through circles, nuclei that do not touch or intersect, designed to fit persons in their rooms and physical houses, hospital wings, quarantined neighborhoods, cities, regions, states, even islands, and continents. Assigned inter-space are thus marked in concentric circles, while AI algorithms process carefully inputted values to produce models, short-term or long-term predictions of sundry scientific and social responses, in order to both prevent the disease spread, reduce its negative effects, but also construct several scenarios that span the transition towards still unknown novel social relations. Hence, the measurement of distance in the present moment should be conducted through the coordinate system and equations with variables consisting of general biological processes like life, contamination, infection, transmission, as well as immunity and autoimmunity. These elements of course belong to the same thesaurus and can be visually represented through multidimensional value sets.

In the next step, however, it is important to think distance as an epistemological process (people in the world think the world, but also themselves within that world) that (1.) connects various elements of reality or the same elements of various realities; (2.) with their conspicuous mixing, these elements become unavoidably interactive; (3.) in that interaction they find their naming reason; and (4.) they might cause an (albeit not necessarily causal) chain of events that turn the phenomenon and revived concept of ›distance‹ into necessity for any thematization of social relations.

Nevertheless, the first step in delineating the ›vocabulary‹ of distance is not testing and processing the word itself, but rather in seeking those elements due to which thinking distance turns into the word ›distance‹, and then the concept in which ›distancing‹ is an operative vector.

We have embarked on this adventure following Michel Foucault and his phrase *vocabulaire de la distance*, used in a 1963 manifesto-text, commenting on the status of ›fiction‹ in relation to reality. His intention was to scrub the use of words and contradictions that sustain fiction (so easily ›dialecticalizing‹ it); seeking, instead, the confrontation or abolition of the [opposition] of the subjective and objective, the interior and exterior, the real and imaginary. Indeed, Foucault wanted to substitute »a mixed lexicography« (*lexique du mélange*)[1] with *le vocabulaire de la distance*, in order to show that the fictional is by its nature the distance of language in relation to things.

Historically, the methods used in ethnography, sociology, anthropology, social psychology applied to describe, map, measure, analyze distance and construct models of social distancing, *distanciation sociale*, and social distance, have, especially with the introduction of new techniques and technologies, varied in their degrees of pragmatism. Rarely have they been unequivocal, reaching for economic, political, ideological input from neighboring disciplines. They included increasingly complex terms to describe newly-observed factors and develop first diagrammatic and then parametric structure of social relations. The human world gradually lost its one-dimensionality, becoming the world of all living beings and things; the old, human coordinate system became more inclusive. Consider the great expansion in use of microscopes and telescopes in the seventeenth century, rendering visible the infinitesimally small and apparent the unfathomably distant. By simply shifting the scale of what was perceivable, the human relationship to distance became more complex: the tiny world of bacteria and cells was brought closer in vision, but further away in otherness. From its very first explorations by Robert Hooke[2] and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek[3] to the present moment and our grappling with the nature of Covid-19, humans have had to open up room – set themselves at a distance – for the otherness it sought to include.

Recall that for Georg Simmel's operationalization of distance manifested in problematizing the stranger. He introduces the notion of spatial sociology, thus categorizing distance in social world differentiating »the wanderer«, »the outsider«, and »the stranger« – and the last must never be classified as complete reject: »the stranger« is so close yet far, loosely connected to the community, while the reject is so very far away.[4] Simmel connects the idea of the stranger and concept of social distance with the category of humanity. More important still for the present understanding of transformation of social distance, the category of humanity is considered through a three-dimensional Euclidian coordinate system. Social dis-

1 Cf. Tel Quel: Théorie d'Ensemble.
2 Cf. Hooke: Micrographia.
3 Cf. Leeuwenhoek: Alle de Brieven van Antoni van Leeuwenhoek.
4 Cf. Simmel: The Sociology of Georg Simmel.

tance is defined as a social gap between social groups, with a clear effort to delimit definite categorizations of race, ethnicity, gender, and other divisions that would become the clichés of the twentieth century. (After all, the stranger too becomes a versatile figure imputed with myriad biases.) In the univalence of such a coordinate system, having never belonged to a group, but precisely in his non-belonging, the stranger was always the factor of its consolidation. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social distancing solidified into a process in which acceptance and separation, assimilation and rejection served the purpose of well-known binary opposite models: urban/rural, young/old, white/color, individual/community. The consequences have been complex and lasting, as they expressed themselves through different systems of values when it comes to describing social distancing in various disciplines. Lest we forget, in the history of emancipatory movements, the struggle against segregation began first in the abolition of various *de jure* segregations, only later taking up the far more difficult task of rooting out *de facto* segregation.

In sharpening the struggle against binaries, we must certainly mention Adolf Reinach. Namely, in the early twentieth century, using the phenomenology of binaries, Reinach identified the existence of certain negative social acts (*negative soziale Akte*).[5] He indicated the imaginary difference between negative social acts and simple negative acts, which fits into the image of social distance as distinct from physical distance. The effort Reinach deployed to think the construction of social distance and negative social acts is inversely proportional to the present moment necessitating the opposite process of thinking. What remains of social relations if they are shaped in a situation in which distance, the elementary, separates two bodies that have no contact? How can we determine the gap that still assumes or implies partial or imaginary belonging to a social group? What is taking place between two bodies that do not touch or approach one another, even if they are able to move closer or towards others?

Although social distance indicates a clear presence and existence of another – in contrast with Simmel, this other is similar to us, standing at a commensurable and sufficient length from us – it would appear that such a concept of the other has certain unusual characteristics: the other not one who can determine us and upon whom we depend; the other cannot be assimilated or reduced its difference to us; the speech of the other is not my speech; with the other, one cannot work or conduct joint work; with the other, one cannot walk together, eat together, shake hands, nor can the other either be guest or host. All the basic forms of closeness and intimacy implemented and regulated through social distance could be further defined and reconstructed more precisely for the purpose of seeking its opposite: the meaning of ›social‹ in the phrase ›social distance‹. The other at a distance is

5 Cf. Reinach: Die sozialen Akte; and Reinach: Nichtsoziale und soziale Akte.

one to whom we are necessarily different (which difference or differentiation produces distance), and this other is substantively unlike us.

Further, the »pathos of distance« as formulated by Nietzsche is not different to Levinas' insistence on the existence on the otherness of the other, the absolute other (so other that they are God or enemy, and therefore not at all close or intimate, which brings us back to Simmel). Nietzsche's formulation was at some point interesting, as it described a specific effort characteristic of certain epochs for distance or differentiation to be aggressively produced in relation to the other or another body. Thus, a basic feature of distance is its auto-referential dimension or imperative. And it is entirely current today, when we hear the speech act: »keep your distance!« or »*faire de la distance!*«[6]

It is important here to mention one further reference: Aby Warburg, upon whom many twentieth-century semioticians have drawn, laments monumental art, contrasting »bourgeois ›primitive‹ desire to grasp things and to demand ›palpable‹ detailed and concrete art with a more civilized attitude,« thus actually introducing a critical perspective on taste that ought to be the first test in distance-practicing. Warburg writes: »there is no more distance!« [es gibt keine Entfernung mehr!], adding immediately: »*Du lebst und thust mir nichts!*« (You live and do me no harm!).[7] Even the misunderstood Warburg considered distancing a recipe and desirable form of acting and thinking.

What does this speech act really say? Does it now carry a new meaning, sure to transform our vocabulary of distance? What do the slogans ›keep clear,‹ ›do not touch (me)‹ or else ›I have nothing to do with you‹ (even though I am aware of you and your proximity), but also, ›I do not wish to be hurt or contaminated by you,‹ ›I do not wish to be mortal like you, to be given your mortality,‹ ›I do not wish to receive that of which you too should be free or clear‹ (that which is alien – virus, corruptibility, or mortality). Such resistance to the other, in reality producing distance, almost certainly gives an illusion that some simple, separated life (or one's one bare life) or life that is not communal or in a group, is even possible.

Is it really a matter of mere or bare life (*bloßes Leben*), that is, a life that seems to precede everything not itself (and thus also law, i. e. norm)? What is this bare life? Recall that Walter Benjamin uses the phrase »*bloßes Leben*,« four times in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, while Giorgio Agamben unjustifiably turns into »bare life« (*nuda vita*),[8] *nacktes Leben* in *Homo sacer*. The same happens in *Nudità*, where the phrase *nuda corporeità* makes an appearance.[9] For the sake of accuracy and for the sake of later repercussions in this brief dictionary of distance, it should be

6 Cf. Lütticken: Keep Your Distance.
7 Cf. Warburg: Fragments sur l'expression.
8 Agamben: Homo sacer, p. 75.
9 Cf. Agamben: Nudità, p. 89.

added that Benjamin uses this phrase in order to oppose Kurt Hiller and his position that existence as such is more important than happiness and a just existence or life (»*Falsch und niedrig ist der Satz, dass Dasein höher als gerechtes Dasein stehe, wenn Dasein nichts als bloßes Leben bedeutet soll – und in dieser Bedeutung steht er in der genannten Überlegung*«).[10]

But let us go step by step, for when it comes to semiotic constraints of life, it is particularly important to move through the first two decades of the twentieth century: What, in the first place, is life? Specifically, what is the life of one living (*la vie d'un vivant*)?[11] At the beginning of his lecture *La nouvelle connaissance de la vie* from 1966, Canguilhem is clear: »By life, we mean the present participle or the past participle of the verb to live, the living and the lived«.[12] Positivist and functional, the definition from the beginning of the nineteenth century is sufficiently convincing: »Life is a set of functions that resists death«.[13] A variation of this position is also put forward by Claude Bernard in *Définition de la vie*, published 1875 in *La Revue de deux mondes*. »A surgeon at the school in Paris, Pelletan, teaches that life is the resistance offered by organized matter to causes that seek ceaselessly to destroy it«.[14] This definition incorporates a negation into itself: the negation and end of life, but it also implies a concept of organization or plurality of functions that life ought to possess in order to resist and withstand its own end. Thus, this definition that implies that life is a complex and complicated order still defies the fiction of »mere or bare life« (*bloßes Lebens*). In 1930, Georg Misch used the phrase »bloß menschliches Leben«.[15] The idea that life can be determined without the help of other terms, that life can be directly experienced is indeed empty banter. Heinrich Rickert assigns this fantasy to intuitive vitalism in the book *Die Philosophie des Lebens* with the claim: *Das bloße Leben halte ich für sinnlos*, because it is of no value and because it is naught but vegetating.[16] Bruno Bauch repeats this argument seven years later in *Philosophie des Lebens und Philosophie der Werte*. A little later, in the foreword of the second edition, Rickert writes: »I consider bare life meaningless. Only a philosophy of a meaningful life, which is always more than mere life, would seem to me to be a goal worthy of striving, and only based on the theory of non-living valid values that give meaning to life can promise that a goal will be achieved«.[17] Explaining over the course of a hundred places that *die Philosophie des bloßen Lebens* has no future whatsoever,

10 Benjamin: Zur Kritik der Gewalt, p. 62.
11 Cf. Canguilhem: Études d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences, p. 764.
12 Canguilhem: Vie, p. 335.
13 Bichat: Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort, p. 57.
14 Bernard: Définition de la vie, p. 23.
15 Misch: Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie, p. 24.
16 Rickert: Philosophie des Lebens, p. 129.
17 Ibid. XI.

Rickert in a counterintuitive way and in opposition to his own constructive efforts, opens a clear path for thinking this very dimension of non / accountability of bare or mere life, and does so precisely through a construct and new concept of social distance that would come to be discussed nearly a century later.

In this confusion and *lexical mélange* – lest we forget Foucault – ruled on the one hand by polyvalent meanings of social distancing grounded in a functional differentiation of various social systems, while on the other, we find a very important biological dimension of life in general, and human life in particular – it is necessary to overcome the classical and standard understanding of social distancing. We will not find either Marx nor Polany, or else Norbert Elias or Helmuth Plessner helpful, nor even Bourdieu, since, as mentioned, the coordinate system and factors analyzed through measurement or forecasting of effects of distancing cannot display the complexity of the contemporary model of distance. In an endeavor to include this biological dimension of the life of humans (noting that biopolitical variations are also not satisfactory), what is needed is to indicate the very insufficiency of our natural language and a lack of a conceptual corpus with which to analyze this new form of social distance.

How come the descriptions, recommended laws, temporary measure of protection are all dominated by expert languages of biology, epidemiology, infectiology, and related disciplines? Do these expert fields have a firm grasp on the terminological *differentia specifica* among the key words of contagiousness, contamination, infection, transmission, hygiene, as well as immunity and autoimmunity, allowing them to no longer carry equivocation and confusion into the domain of lay and mass use? It would be useful to vectorize this use, that is, follow the various iterations in order to recognize factors presentable in a multidimensional coordinate system, in which the concept of distance would be pragmatic, but also have an unequivocal performative value. Perhaps it is not sufficient to be merely performative, but in its performativity to also not sow the negative emotions of fear and panic or animosity, but rather unreserved values of care. Let us not forget, however, the cultural backlash experienced by those doctors who pursued changes in habits and conventions: not even so long ago, in the mid-nineteenth century, the man to whom we owe the basic act of hand-washing, Ignaz Semmelweiss, perished, aged only fifty, isolated in a sanatorium for the insane, completely ignored.

Here are the questions from the beginning of the text, once again: How has ›distance‹ come about? Has there been a transformation of thinking distance? Does its normalization and subsequent normativization announce a paradigmatic shift ›about‹ distance? Seeking to formulate a problem through which these questions could be more easily answered, we will cite a recent marketing scheme at a California presentation of a new driverless car. The market had been primed; all the preconditions of production were completed when the pandemic struck. The CEO of The Steer Tech start-up, Anuja Sonalker, launched a PR campaign

with the slogan »Humans are biohazards, machines are not«.[18] Leaving aside the benchmark analysis of intentions or motives, or the language coming to the rescue of finances, and indeed the market patterns of any start-up, the slogan provides a perfect chiasmus for pause and warning.

Humans – as living – are potentially detrimental to the lives of other humans. Much as other particularly mobile animals, mosquitos, rats, or other less widespread rodents, people are a biological danger, as they are vectors of disease spread to themselves and others. In opposition to previous preventive and hygienic discourses on epidemics, infections, pestilences, etc., the development of AI in conjunction with other processes of automation, allow for the formation of ethical, emotional, and ontologically neutral models that will in the near future allow humans to be thought of exclusively as a biological vector.

It is no longer merely matter of Warburg's noble formulation, »You live and do me no harm!«[19] that could not only aestheticize, but humanize Anuja Sonalker's statement; rather, by reconstructing ›the vocabulary of distance,‹ we could also closer establish the values that follow the determining vector of degree of protection to simultaneously preserve one's humanity and one's selfish need for self-preservation.

To employ the language of epidemiology, we are seeking two values of equal importance. The first is *R number* or the Ro representing ›the basic reproduction number,‹ used to measure the transmission potential of any disease. It is the number of persons that an infect individual will, on average, pass the virus on to. Ro is influenced by characteristics of the specific disease, i. e. how easily it passes from person to person. Our behavior largely impacts the R number. It is important to keep the R number value bellow 1, which means that the documented number of cases is shrinking. Anything above 1 suggests new cases and subsequent infections, or the situation of contagiousness. Still, the R number is not sufficient as it only shows the increase or decrease of an epidemic, but not how large it is. »R should always be considered alongside the number of people currently infected,« as explained on the UK government website,[20] continuing »If R equals 1 with 100,000 people currently infected, it is a very different situation to R equals 1 with 1,000 people currently infected«. In order to complete the picture, there is also the K number, or K value, as a metric used to shed light on the variations of the R number now in the context of all UK Covid-19 cases. It provides scientists with a more nuanced view of how the disease is spreading, rather than simply tracking whether it is spreading. While R number represents the average number of people a single infected person will go on to infect, K number highlights that not all

18 Cf. Lekach: »It Took a Coronavirus Outbreak for Self-Driving Cars to Become More Appealing«.
19 Warburg: Fragments sur l'expression.
20 Government Office for Science: The Latest R Number Range for the UK.

infected people will go on to infect the same number. When K value is less than one, this indicates a high variation in spreading patterns. Dr Adam Kucharski, an expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine explained that: »The general rule is that the smaller the K value is, the more transmission comes from a smaller number of infectious people, Once K is below one, you have got the potential for super-spreading.«[21]

Why, then, would it be helpful to follow Warburg's advice to *keep the distance*, while rationalizing it with some scientific knowledge?[22] Let us resume that alongside R number, K number may determine how, when, and at what rate it will be possible to continue with life, revive quotidian habits without at any point endangering social relations or discriminating against anyone.

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21 Kurcharski cited by Davis: K Number.
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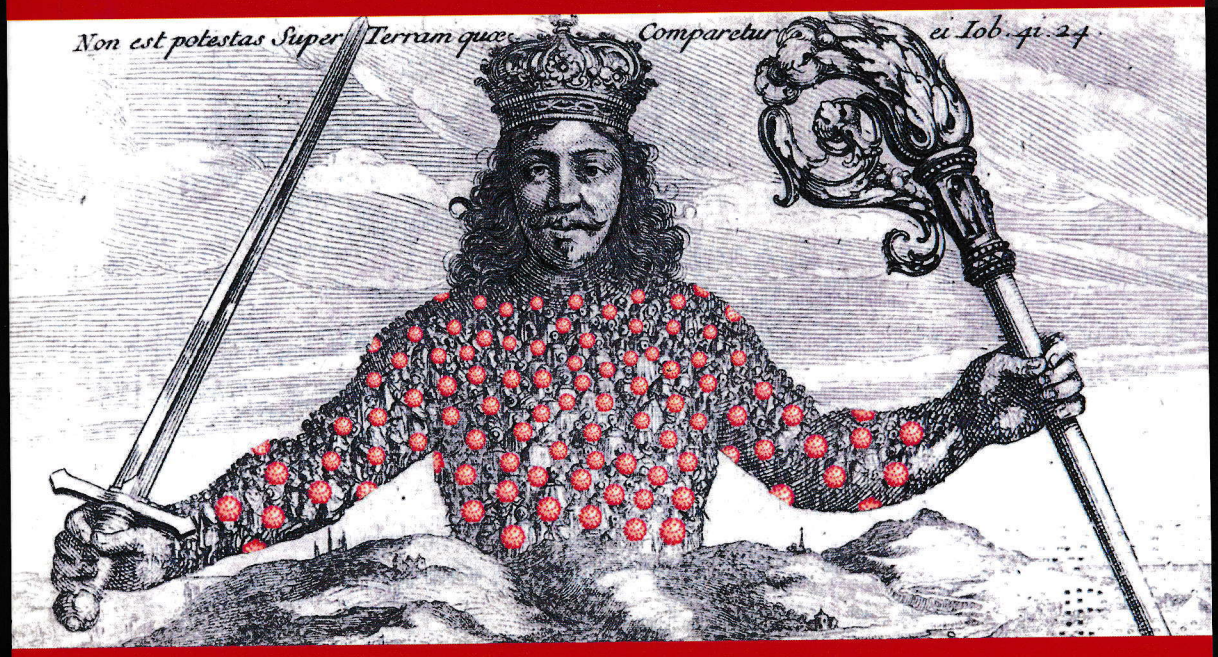

In the Realm of Corona Normativities

A Momentary Snapshot of a Dynamic Discourse

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