The Influence of Covid-19-Induced Unease Infrastructure on Cultural and Social Spheres

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Abstract. Covid-19 challenged the entire population of the world, affected everyone and all spheres of life, and changed the content, and the ways, of communication. For example, medical discourse was integrated in a variety of discursive fields. Covid-19 brought with it individual anxiety that was transformed into moral panic. The anxiety was further amplified by the *unease infrastructure* in everyday culture. This is found in the procedural aspects of culture, from the semantics and pragmatics of language to cultural patterns. Social and cultural presumptions were also revised during the pandemic so that the cultural reputations of topos were transformed and the cultural presumption of innocence, the basic for communication, was replaced by the opposite, the presumption of guilt. As a result, people began to perceive each other as potential threat carriers, as potential carriers of the virus. In the paper, I present the mechanisms of building unease infrastructure during the pandemic, various ways to overcome anxiety, and the impact of unease infrastructure on the individual level. I will talk about the influence of the unease infrastructure on changes in common sense, individual preference, and the social levels of the acceptable in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19, unease infrastructure, presumption, anxiety, urban trauma, panics

Introduction

Covid-19 challenged the entire population of the world, affected everyone and all spheres of life, and changed the content, and the ways, of communication. Relationships between people were built to take into account the danger of infection, and social space was transformed in two ways, the space of *real* threat (the definitely sick) and the space of *potential* danger (the potentially sick). Either way, both carried a threat, real or potential. This has affected both everyday practices, mental maps and folk toponymy, as well as the economy, politics, official topography of the city and the degree of state interference in private life. The social processes associated with Covid-19 have generated new forms of individual activity, rearranged individual trajectories of movement. This is associated with specific forms of tourism such as escapist, vaccination, therapeutic (Abbaspour; Soltani and Tham 2020). The habitual economic relations of late capitalism were revised as a result of the Covid crisis and the well-established liberal conventions were questioned (Bonetti *et al.* 2021; Ferstman & Fegan 2020; Satar & Alarifi 2022), especially with regard to the economy of providing medical services and the production of goods for medical institutions (Mahr & Dickel 2020; Barlow *et al.* 2021; Chehrehgosha & Royani 2020). In the absence of accurate information, clear instructions or specific medical scenarios for diagnosis and treatment (especially at the beginning of the pandemic), there was a special need for qualified medical care, despite there not being enough doctors. This stimulated the development of non-traditional forms of medical counselling (Zhou *et al.* 2020) and generally strengthened the position of the digital (remote, contactless) service sector. The changes made by the Covid-19 virus also affected strategies of cooperation between EU countries (Mildner 2020).

In the article, I am interested in how the external (i.e. information) is transformed by an individual into internal experiences, stereotypes and attitudes, and what causes Covid challenges and structural changes to be transformed into individual (vernacular) reactions. That's why I focus on the mechanisms that create *unease infrastructure* during pandemics, the impact of this infrastructure at an individual level and, briefly, various ways to overcome anxiety. The main task is to record and describe the mechanism of formation of vernacular content from external experience. In the article I aim to generalise the available

approaches and results, and so I actively draw on existing literature based on field research. This generalising approach allows me to put the extreme experience of Covid vernacularisation into a broader context. This context is the proposition that extreme experiences such as pandemic experiences change social presumptions, and that this in turn leads to a transformation of social action and increases personal anxiety in all areas of human life. In this article I will try to verify this position and show the mechanism of anxiety formation as a form of urban trauma.

The Presumption of a Kindly Universe

In 1992, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, researching victimisation, revealed a complex of fundamental assumptions about the world's meaningfulness and benevolence (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), the presence of which becomes noticeable when they are destroyed as a result of trauma. We are not aware of them and take them for granted, so they exist as a presumption that can be called the presumption of a kindly universe. "They are an invisible but vital part of our internal cognitive model of the world and underpin a sense of basic well-being" (Kaminer & Eagle 2010: 61). They give us impetus in our daily activities because they are the starting point for unconscious actions, they "help us to maintain some sense of predictability and control in a world that would otherwise feel utterly random and unpredictable" (Kaminer & Eagle 2010: 61). These basic settings are simple and in the most general form look like this:

  - we are invulnerable (for example, we believe that 'it can't happen to me'),
  - we are good and worthy people,
  - other people are fundamentally good,
  - the world is governed by just and orderly social laws (for example, 'if I am cautious, I can avoid misfortune', or 'if I am good, nothing bad will happen to me'). (Kaminer & Eagle 2010: 61).

However, real traumatic experience leads the individual to understand that the presumption of a kindly universe does not work. "The survivor must search for new beliefs and assumptions that can enable him or her to make sense of what has taken place and to go forward into the future" (Kaminer & Eagle 2010: 79). Presumption needs a revision of the basic meanings that previously existed as

obvious, as unconditional. Filling in the broken links between self-perception and the events that have taken place forces us to look for explanations, leading to feelings of guilt, victim complexes, depression, etc.

Crisis of trust

The psychological presumption of the kindly universe is also the source of the social presumption, embodied in jurisprudence in the form of the presumption of innocence as fundamental to any legal proceedings against an individual. The presumption of innocence presupposes the openness of the subject to the world. The possibility of a market economy and democracy is built on this presumption. However, it is in doubt when it comes to a threat to global security. Concern about the hidden threat posed, for example, by terrorism, leads and has led to a legislative revision and restriction on the presumption of innocence for those suspected of certain crimes. "As the threat of terrorism has become more pervasive, and as generalized anxiety about criminal behavior in our communities has increased, community pressure to 'deal with' those suspected of serious crime has also increased", as Anthony Davidson Gray states (Gray 2017: 570). This is what J. Baudrillard pointed out in his article "The Spirit of terrorism" when he drew attention to the victory of terrorism even outside the direct action of, for example, bombings. He described the depth of the infection of modern society and modern culture by terrorism, "To the point that the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is already fading from minds and mores, and liberal globalization is coming about in precisely the opposite form – a police-state globalization, a total control, a terror based on "law-and-order' measures, Deregulation ends up in a maximum of constraints and restrictions, akin to those of a fundamentalist society" (Baudrillard 2003: 32).

Any panic attacks, any attacks of social fear could lead to degradation of the key presumption on which free exchange and the idea of democracy and liberalism are based, the presumption of innocence. Covid-19 has brought unprecedented or forgotten challenges to European society, which past generations had tried to build into a predictable system of stable events. The coronavirus has absorbed predictability and certainty. In a pandemic, or even an epidemic, the presumption of innocence is replaced by the presumption of guilt, according to which everyone is suspected of being a carrier of the virus. The social response

to the challenge is radically simple, and it is to block the minority policy that is the basis of the European value system, to universalise an attitude that disregards minorities' "philosophies and practices of care" (Hashiguti, Radios Baptista, Cadilhe 2021: 36; Ala *et al.* 2021; Walubita *et al.* 2021). The initial assumption of innocence fits perfectly into the idea of additional minority rights (Deets 2006; Krasner 2001). However in a pandemic situation, the collective body turns out to be more important than the individual, as a result of which the boundary of the individual (Myself and non-Myself) is more clearly delineated. The Other (and the collective Other) localises the Myself identity. Everyone should avoid the Other, suspecting him or her of carrying the virus. A virus, especially in the initial stage of a pandemic, is compared to a bacteriological weapon and any patient who appears in a public place is compared to a bioterrorist. The corresponding attitude is demonstrated by politicians and public figures (Tuncer & Şahin 2021) and fits into the established discursive binary models of Myself and the Other (Gao 2021), also being embodied in the East–West opposition (Zhang 2021; Yalsharzeh & Monsefee 2021). When the presumption of an evil universe operates, there can be no conciliation. The drastic change in presumptions that the virus has initiated makes mutual trust impossible.

War as the result of a change in presumption

Total suspicion, imposed by the fear of terror, presupposes the possibility of total destruction, and therefore needs weapons of mass destruction (bacteriological or nuclear). The target is invisible and therefore means such as carpet bombing or the use of napalm can be justified. But the radicalised total suspicion caused by the virus makes a real war necessary, war that Baudrillard called the "conventional safety shield (écran *de protection*)" (Baudrillard 2003: 25), since it formalises and reveals an enemy who was previously hidden, makes the object of threat concrete and gives certainty to events. I would venture to suggest that in conditions of anxiety, tension from uncertainty, total suspicion and the inversion of presumption, a major war is a matter of time; it is unleashed by those who are most in thrall to their pathological anxiety. Global epidemics distort the value system and lead to wars as a way to identify the enemy. I would venture to assume an indirect value relationship between the Asiatic flu (or Russian flu) of the 1889–1890 pandemic and the sixth cholera

pandemic (1899–1923), on the one hand, and WWI, on the other hand, between the 1918 influenza pandemic and WWII. However, such assumptions require additional verification and detailed research.

This, of course, is not the only reason for the war, but it allows the war to gain support from the population of the aggressor country. And the same reason allows other countries to perceive even local conflicts as a global problem. The expectation of a hidden threat from the virus is transformed into the expectation of an obvious danger (Rütten & King 2013). An undefined virus can easily transform into a mythical enemy. It does not matter who this appellation is attached to or what abstract image is drawn by an audience in a state of (moral) panic ready to explain the inexplicable with the help of any conspiracy. The virus, as a hidden threat, transforms the perception of protest and insurgent movements because of the inversion of presumption, leading to a radicalisation of mutual threats in the struggle of ideologies (Mirchandani 2020).

The virus works as a catalyst, triggering irreversible processes that result in a war that is global, or perceived as global. However, the virus does not generate the social or political processes that give rise to war, this is done by the states themselves, by governments, with populations supporting them.

Unease infrastructure

The urban environment is an excellent place for viral inversions of presumption due to the prevailing anxiety to be found there, exacerbated by the *unease infrastructure* (Troitskiy & Tsarev 2022: 132–133) of everyday culture. We proposed this term to describe a complex of symbolical factors that together generate unease and anxiety in any person involved in a semantic environment that fulfils these factors and who interprets these factors as dangerous. For example, media awareness of terrorist acts and a bag left by someone on public transport or in an elevator cause alarm or panic, although the same bag left in the trash is likely to be perceived neutrally (Zaporozhets & Lavrinec 2008: 83–103). "It is like an 'automatic writing' of terrorism constantly refuelled by the involuntary terrorism of news and information" (Baudrillard, 2003: 33). The reproduction of unease is not only the result of the work of media or actors (people or non-people), although the media is called by Bauman and Donskas "the industry of fear" (Bauman & Donskas 2019: 16). Reproduction of unease

is a result of the subjective assembly of meaning from the situation in which a person finds him- or herself. Since we are talking about the production of meaning, the assembler of which is the person, no separate infrastructure element causes unease or anxiety by itself. At the same time, the existing 'anxious' symbolic environment self-generates anxiety, reproducing itself. The anxious interpretation of things and events allows a person to fill in lacunae in explanatory models and interpretative frameworks. Therefore, it is not surprising that unease infrastructure is reflected in the procedural aspects of culture, from the semantics and pragmatics of language to cultural models. Unease infrastructure can exist only in an urban environment, because the highest value there is anonymity, which creates the grounds for misunderstanding and therefore for distrust. Misunderstanding and distrust of the Other co-exist with acceptance of otherness and assumption of the Other (the Stranger), because urban non-places (Augé 2017), heterotopias (Foucault 2006: 191–204, 215–236), make a meeting with the Other (the Strange) possible, and even necessary, although they do not make him, her or it understandable. "It is common to define cities as places where strangers meet, remain in each other's proximity, and interact for a long time without stopping being strangers to each other" (Bauman 2003: 5). At the same time, acceptance and assumption of the Other (the Stranger) do not at all prevent people from perceiving the Other as a source of fear, unease or anxiety.

The 'anxious' urban environment, which ensures the success of the anxious interpretation, was fertile ground for unease infrastructure in conditions of Covid-19. Factors forming the unease infrastructure that surrounds Covid-19 include, for example, news and social media, vaccination sites and various Covid markers in the urban environment (adds, signs), other people wearing masks and gloves, ambulance sirens, an abundance of masks and gloves in trash cans, social advertising and advertising of medical services for the treatment and diagnosis of the virus, visible symptoms in other people (sneezing, coughing, runny nose).

Panic and anxiety

At the beginning of the pandemic, "the imminent pandemic with insufficient understanding of the virus has placed significant pressure on the health care

systems managing the disease and heightened anxiety among the citizens" (Zhou *et al.* 2020: 2). Covid-19 brought additional individual anxiety (Feiz Arefi & Poursadeqiyan 2022; Kandpal & Wani 2020), which transformed into moral panic (Capurro *et al.* 2022; DeVore *et al.* 2021; Satawedin 2020). "Anxiety has reached to this level that a person who used to see regular videos on coronavirus, he got infected with the normal flue, he started telling people to stay away from him and if anyone tried to come close to him, he would pelt stones at them" (Kandpal & Wani 2020: 291).

According to recent research, "Anxiety is the most common mental disorder in the U.S." (Dershowitz & Hudson 2022). Panic moods and anxiety spread especially quickly thanks to social networks (Vannucci, Flannery & McCauley Ohannessian 2017) and, as an instant response, conspiracy theories (Craft, Ashley & Maksl 2017; Connolly *et al.* 2019) spread thanks to these networks. Both conspiracy theories and rumours were a reaction to the lack of accurate information, an attempt to fill in these lacunae (Kirziuk 2021; Calisher *et al.* 2020). This led, among other things, to social shifts, protests, etc., i.e. to a division in society according to the principle of attitude to vaccination (Kirziuk 2021; Voronov 2021). As a result, there were many debates about how important social networks are in the dissemination of information, whether the state can interfere in the free functioning of the media to relieve tension and establish calm, whether freedom of speech is still more important, how social networks should be managed in a medical crisis and what the tasks of the state are (Sharifee; Nematollahzadeh & Labafi 2019; Marciano & Yadlin 2021). Panic is faster than official messages from government officials and doctors.

Covid-19 memory and commemoration as a tool of urban trauma

The media use various strategies to work with the memory of Covid-19, in all cases creating objects of urban trauma (Troitskiy & Tsarev 2022: 131–133) as a type of collective experience that has been embedded in the process of the individual's senses, built on the possibility of repeating the traumatic experience of another individual from the collective body. An important aspect of urban trauma is anonymity, which ensures equality of all residents before receiving a traumatic experience, i.e. anyone can become a traumatic subject as the result

of a random coincidence. A citizen is not only a potential victim, but also a conductor of urban trauma. It is conveyed as a presumption for experiencing and interpreting any experience. This makes urban trauma a key factor in building behavioural strategies and everyday trajectories. Urban trauma is based on transmitting and receiving information about someone else's traumatic experience, where the traumatic subject him- or herself is silent. Urban trauma exists in two dimensions: diachronic and synchronic. In the former, it acts as cultural (historical) trauma associated with the traumatic experiences of the residents of the city, and memorial infrastructure forms around it. In the latter, it acts as potential individual trauma, the possibility of which is included in everyday urban life, with unease infrastructure forming around it (Troitskiy & Tsarev 2022: 132).

Commemorative practices re-actualise feelings that are painful for those who have been involved or are now involved in the experience of loss. Social media demonstrates possibilities "that transcend established boundaries of space, time and social experience" (Keightley & Schlesinger 2014: 747), although at the same time creating new boundaries (Zelizer 2002: 699) to the interpretation of one's own experience. This is especially noticeable when individual memory is superimposed on cultural (collective) memory, or when memory passes into post-memory. Cinema, photo, audio and visual works have the ability to make a painful experience external to the author and the depicted, while at the same time including the audience in the experience. Individual works cannot create the kind of commemorative effect that *lieu de mémoire* and commemorative spaces create both in real space (Nora 1984; Nora 1999) and in virtual space (Hess 2007). Unlike street monuments, etc., which require activity from the audience, commemorative spaces on the Internet come to users themselves, assuming passive participation that the user can refuse by turning off the computer or simply closing the site. In this case "the durability of the digital monuments is challenged by the very form they take due to their potentially ephemeral nature" (Hess 2007: 812). *Lieu de mémoire*, commemorative spaces, are a combination of factors; they are works that create a memorial environment. Unlike a single work, the effect of which is limited, a memorial environment uses intermediate means and involves various sensory organs. Commemorative spaces are designed to speak on behalf of the silent victims of the pandemic, the silent majority, in order that they continue in a state of unease, thinking that such a thing could

happen to anyone. In other words, these spaces become instruments of urban trauma. Covid-19 became the object of commemorative practices even before the pandemic ended (Adams & Kopelman 2021), so these spaces combined both aspects of urban trauma, i.e. synchronic and diachronic. Covid discursive practices rebuild existing configurations of commemorative practices using the closest historical interpretative frameworks, at the same time rebuilding these frameworks (Steir-Livny 2022; Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2021; Barry 2020).

Despite the fact that commemorative spaces and commemorative practices evoke negative feelings at the individual level, they allow these objects of commemoration to enter discourse at the level of culture as a whole, bringing acceptance of loss (Adams & Edy 2021).

Overcoming anxiety and unease

Attempts to overcome anxiety and cope with panic were noted from the very beginning of the Covid crisis. These are the first reactions that people needed, not to overcome the pandemic but rather to find ways to cope with their own emotions (Attoe & Chimakonam 2021). It is impossible to say which of the ways was the most common statistically, which was the most effective, but it is possible to state that they were used not only separately but also in combination.

Unease and anxiety, as well as other excessive emotions, are blocked by various techniques of concentration on everyday rituals and simple things, so it is not surprising that the simplest and most necessary means to cope with psychological stress was to go into the daily automatism of actions and to focus on this. This form of care was complemented by other escapist practices, for example, modelling nostalgic experiences (Wulf, Breuer & Schmitt 2021). Striving for an ideal past compensated for the crisis experiences of the present, filling in the lacuna in the meanings of life that arose as a result of Covid-19 and the accompanying changes.

Daily rituals and escapism are joined by a complex of practices related to institutionalised and folk (vernacular) religion (Ndaluka et al. 2021; Jacobsen, Kuehle, Christensen 2021), which allows us to build an alternative system of meaning.

Humour has become a common way to cope with serious Covid challenges (Hiiemäe *et al.* 2021; Meder 2021; Ouviña & Pilar 2021; Fiadotava & Vool-

aid 2021: 72–78; Weydmann & Cirosmann 2020). Elliott Oring (1987) pointed out that this is one of the first and most constructive reactions, despite the apparent destructive content (black humour) and objects of ridicule (death, illness, viruses, etc.). Terrible events give rise to the need to make people fearless by bringing them to the point of absurdity and emphasizing the discursive source of unease and anxiety. In the situation of Covid, "people tend to make choices between a limited number of previously tested motifs and practices" (Hiiemäe *et al.* 2021: 45). A limited set of proven humorous tools allows an individual to create an understandable and clear semantic system in which anxiety does not find sufficient reason to be the only emotion, since all its objects are humorously questioned. This therapeutic effect of humour was spread thanks to the global media, for example, social networks (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021; Voolaid 2022; Fiadotava 2020; Jürgens *et al.* 2021).

Overcoming unease and anxiety occurred not only by working with emotions and feelings, but also through the desire to regain control of the situation. In this regard, a powerful volunteer movement is emerging, and Transparency Market Research has noted an increase in the growing demand for global medical education stimulated by Covid-19 (*Medical Education Market…* 2020).

The methods described above all seem to be effective in combating anxiety and unease, although they do not remove it completely, rather they remove its excesses. In contrast, these methods confirm the potential danger and add content to the unease infrastructure which is the background to everyday life, fixing the virus as a source of danger. The activities built around Covid-19, including those that overcome anxiety, have noticeably changed the cultural landscape, transforming vernacular aspects, trajectories and strategies of life.

Conclusion

Summing up, I argue that the coronavirus turned out to be one of the most effective agents of history. Its influence is noticeable in all spheres and on all interconnected subject's both external and internal. In coronavirus conditions, the influence of individual stereotypes, perceptions, fears and prejudices on the economy, politics, culture, etc., turned out to be stronger than their ability to adjust and correct themselves. Individuals, guided by their own vernacular ideas, violated the natural course of the processes adopted. At the same time,

these individuals received support from the population, which was also guided by their own fears and ideas. The unease infrastructure created around the virus has helped to support and preserve the cultural reputation of the virus and individual anxiety in people. The unease caused by the danger of Covid-19 transformed into anxiety and a change in the population's basic presumptions about each other. The total suspicion of contagion, imposed on urban culture as an anxiety environment, contributed to the transformation of relations between people and between countries. It would seem that in a difficult situation it is necessary to unite, but the pandemic has shown that the presumption of guilt turns out to be a good basis for mutual suspicion, separation and even war. So, the presumption of the good universe was reformatted into the presumption of the evil universe, which only contributed to the further transformation of vernacular ideas. The developed ways of overcoming anxiety, i.e. humour, escapism, everyday life rituals, religion and belief, self-education on the one hand, removed the severity of the experience, while on the other hand fixing the attitude to the virus as a source of anxiety.

Ackowledgements

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