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Forgetting War

a phenomenological commentary on bodies, space, and language in the coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

Reflecting on the far-reaching changes the coronavirus has brought about in all spheres of life, this article takes an anthropological and phenomenological perspective on the new 'normals' of the pandemic, specifically with regards to bodily and linguistic practices. By placing phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in conversation with anthropologists like Mauss, the article illuminates the ways in which the disruption posed by the pandemic has fundamentally altered our relation to others, our bodies, and ourselves. The article then moves to destabilize the dichotomy of 'ordinary' and 'exception' by analyzing the militarization of language; in showing its limitations in grappling with a world in pandemic, the article concludes with a call for novel forms of language that de-emphasize adversariality and instead promote the empathy and memory that the pandemic demands.

Keywords phenomenology, bodies, bodily techniques, space, language, Coronavirus, pandemic

If there is anything that everyone can agree on amid the flux of uncertainties, ambiguities, and misinformation in this time of crisis, it is that the coronavirus pandemic has made us hyperaware of bodies in space. Safety guidelines issued by governments and public health organizations have drawn our attention to the kinds of spaces we inhabit: open, closed, crowded, well-ventilated. They have heightened our awareness of the bodies that inhabit those spaces: old,

young, healthy, sick. They have made us mindful of how those bodies are, and should be, protectively clothed: wearing masks, gloves, face shields, bodysuits. And, of course, in the form of social distancing, they have made us conscious of how distance between bodies can and should be maintained in space.

While it is abundantly clear that the pandemic has posed a major disruption to all aspects of our lives—social, political, financial, domestic—what does not always dominate news headlines is how it has altered us on the bodily level. The virus has interrupted our established "body techniques," the phrase Mauss (1979) uses to refer to the ways in which people know how to use their bodies. Shaking hands is now a health risk, sharing food and drink is a potential source of infection, and we are even cautioned against engaging in physical acts of familiarity and intimacy with friends and family. Moreover, universalizing public health guidelines such as social distancing have exposed the many factors that determine how different social groups respond to the pandemic. In my home city of Hong Kong, for example, population density is so high and housing so costly that many families have no choice but to live in cramped, multigenerational quarters despite the risks to older individuals. In stark contrast to the wide streets I've observed in the United States, many of the sidewalks in Hong Kong are so crowded and narrow that it is physically impossible to maintain two meters of distance from others at any given time. In response to these behavioral disruptions, we see people everywhere innovating new behaviors that enable the continuity of past ones: putting one's own hands together instead of shaking hands with another person in a gesture of greeting; or conversing through a window or from a balcony rather than face-to-face. In Hong Kong, restaurants cannot afford to close even temporarily due to high rent costs, and so they have creatively inserted plastic dividers in between tables in order to continue operating. Even the most mundane and unconscious of everyday acts—hand washing—has been transformed into a 20-second-long ritual involving careful attention to every nook and cranny of palms, fingers, wrists, and nails. The difficult transition from such a familiar action to one that now demands so much of our attention is perhaps best exemplified by the mnemonic devices that have been devised to remind people of best practices. And even as we silently sing the birthday song twice in our head, we find ourselves trying to resist the temptation to sing at double speed as our bodies impatiently attempt to revert back to old habits.

It is this stubborn persistence that Mauss identifies as a key feature of body techniques. Because they are built up slowly over time, they cannot always be immediately changed even when the situation demands it (Mauss 1979). Like Merleau-Ponty, who distinguishes between "the customary body" and "the body of the moment" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 431), Mauss suggests that our bodies are not merely fleshy instruments at the rational command of our sovereign minds; instead, they are to a large extent conditioned by habits that may even be at odds with our conscious motivations. Alongside other phenomenologists, he argues that there exists no sharp division between body and mind; both are mutually constitutive. Thus, Mauss argues that even with conscious effort, body techniques often adapt only gradually over long periods of time, and sometimes fail to adapt at all (Mauss 1979).

This failure of the body to act in accordance with one's conscious intentions can be considered in terms of Heidegger's notion of equipment, as described in *Being and Time* (2008). For

Heidegger, "equipment" refers to entities in the world that lend themselves to human ends. Equipment that is broken or otherwise unusable appears to us with "conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy"; it "stands in the way" of our goals and draws our attention to its dysfunction (Heidegger 2008, 103–4). If the human body can be considered the original piece of equipment that is presupposed by all bodily behavior in the world, then this pandemic is above all characterized by the failure of our bodies. Over the course of the pandemic, the human body has been constituted first and foremost as something that is vulnerable, and at constant risk of infection. Infection threatens to deprive the body of its abilities through physical discomfort, pain, and permanent tissue damage. It also threatens the body with absolute loss of function: death. Even bodies that are not (yet) physically affected are subject to this vulnerability due to their potential to transmit the virus and harm others. As destabilized objects that are now constantly at risk of both endangering others and being endangered, our bodily apparatuses have not only taken on the character of "broken equipment" that fails to serve our interests, but have even become weaponized against ourselves and others.

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that militarized language has taken root in this narrative of the body under siege. Any threat to health—both personal and public—has a strong tendency to be couched in the military terms of an enemy Other encroaching on the self, which must be protected. Think back to how we were taught in school that the immune system is the human body's first line of defence, or consider the militarized symbolism on these two bottles of anti-bacterial hand soap I noticed in my home: one depicts a sword to fight off and kill harmful germs, while the other sports a gladiator helmet to defend the user from disease (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hand soaps featuring militarized symbolism

When the preservation of health is consistently depicted as a series of adversarial interactions between our bodies and a hostile external threat, it's not at all surprising that a global pandemic that has so severely compromised our everyday bodily behaviors has been declared a war. Every day we hear about essential workers on the "front lines" who are valorized as heroes and martyrs sacrificing their own safety for the sake of others'. Public health efforts are framed as "battling" or "combating" the invisible or unseen enemy, an adversary made even more insidious by its imperceptibility. Consequently, many efforts to vanquish this enemy seek to reveal it through testing, track its movement through contact tracing, and finally eliminate it. Nations have taken up measures that resemble what is commonly understood as total war: directing the majority of resources to the war effort and mobilizing civilians to do so. The President of the United States has publicly identified himself as a wartime president. We need not even mention how nations have actually called upon the military to enforce lockdowns to grasp the extent to which this pandemic has been militarized.

Ostensibly, those who draw on this narrative of wartime crisis are well-intentioned. Often, they deploy this militarized rhetoric to galvanize public sentiment against a common enemy. By placing the virus squarely on the enemy side, they aim to cut across party lines to promote a sense of unity grounded in a basic shared humanity that bypasses political differences. They also create a sense of urgency, that decisive and effective action must be taken immediately before the situation worsens. As ennobled and impassioned as they are, however, these militaristic metaphors can be a double-edged sword (a-ha!). Cynthia Enloe, for example, calls for the demilitarization of pandemic language by arguing that applying antiquated concepts and vocabularies to a novel phenomenon is unhelpful and potentially misleading. One issue she raises is that "wars require enemies, human enemies" (Enloe 2020). Indeed, we have seen how animosity, despite efforts to stress that the virus is the primary enemy, has often been directed at its human proxies. Among those vilified have been Chinese individuals and businesses for supposedly spreading the virus; Chinese culture for permitting strange and unhygienic eating habits; political leaders for mishandling the pandemic; stubborn, ignorant people who refuse to abide by safety guidelines (and even flout them by deliberately touching, licking, or coughing on objects and other people); and most recently, the conspiracy theory that Chinese scientists engineered the virus in a lab.

Although there is some evidence in support of Enloe's claim, I find her argument somewhat simplistic. It's certainly true that many people have sought human targets for blame. It's also true, however, that much militarized language has emphasized that the virus is the true enemy in this so-called war. The same language has anthropomorphized the virus: we often hear personifying statements that ascribe the virus a human-like agency such as, "This virus doesn't discriminate between left and right" and "The virus doesn't take a vacation on the weekends." The implication of these assertions is that the universal human susceptibility to the virus demands that it be faced with equally universal efforts. Enloe's oversight of the anthropomorphization of the virus thus creates a paradox: on the one hand, she asserts that the use of wartime language tends to seek out human enemies as targets for blame; on the other, we also see this same language constituting the virus as a human-like enemy. Enloe's conclusion that wartime rhetoric is counterproductive because it demands human enemies is ultimately self-nullifying: if the concept of war demands human targets while simultaneously anthropomorphizing the virus as human, then the virus is an adequately

human target for war and the problem she raises resolves itself. I suggest, then, that the tension in Enloe's conclusion is best understood not in terms of human vs. nonhuman, but in terms of embodied vs. disembodied. Conventional warfare is waged against embodied enemies, but this war attacks a virus that is itself disembodied but embodies itself in human hosts. In conventional warfare, the aim is to weaken the enemy by eliminating the functioning bodies that serve them. In this so-called war, on the other hand, the aim is to support infected bodies as their immune systems neutralize the virus within them in the hopes that the infected bodies will eventually regain their proper function. If the way to defeat this virus is indeed to support human bodies in recovery, then our language to describe the pandemic should reflect that empathetic, nurturing role, not perpetuate a military narrative of eradication that insists on solving problems through opposition and force.

Zadie Smith observes another weakness of militarized rhetoric: the hard dichotomy it draws between wartime and peacetime. Citing Winston Churchill's post-war defeat by Clement Attlee despite his pivotal role during World War II, Smith argues that peacetime aims demand collective public effort just as much as wartime ones (Smith 2020). Indeed, there is a certain irony in using war—that most political of all concepts—to depoliticize conflict, as we have seen so many public health officials desperately try to do by insisting on the apolitical nature of the pandemic. We can interpret this phenomenon as yet another example of us lapsing into familiarity when faced with the breakdown of established linguistic and conceptual frameworks. The militaristic insistence on war as an exceptional state of affairs that deviates from so-called normal peacetime and thus necessitates exceptional measures obscures the conditions that give rise to war in the first place. As this pandemic has made plain, there are plenty of structural issues that have aggravated the virus' impact. The pandemic has exposed many countries' inability to respond to a public health crisis of this kind due to systemic negligence, such as the United States' ill-timed disbanding of the Global Health Security and Biodefense unit two years ago. Instead of compensating essential workers for their indispensable labor, states instead elect to offer them empty exaltations as heroes while demanding that they continue to work under life-threatening circumstances. And time and time again we hear how marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by the pandemic as a result of poor long-term living conditions that predispose them to infection and death. A military narrative normalizes these losses—after all, every war has its casualties. To be sure, the coronavirus pandemic has been largely unprecedented, thwarting any possibility of perfect preparation. But instead of insisting on the extraordinariness of the situation, we would do better to reflect on what it reveals about our ordinary. The real weakness of militarized rhetoric is that it presents the illusion of a sharp boundary between war and peace, when in fact there is none.

Death is one of the most important themes in *Being and Time*. Heidegger suggests that the prospect of death induces anxiety within us that causes us to forget (Heidegger 2008, 393), and the pandemic has done nothing if not created a pervasive sense of the ever-present possibility of death, of both ourselves and our loved ones. Preoccupied as we are with avoiding death, Heidegger argues, we come to live from moment to immediate moment. As a result, we fail to grasp how the present is influenced by both the past and the future. Militaristic language promotes precisely this sort of forgetting by framing war as an abnormal state of affairs with no relation to peacetime. Instead of using well-established but ill-fitting metaphors to highlight the exceptionality of a novel

phenomenon, we might do well to take up Enloe's challenge to demilitarize our language. Doing so may enable us to scrutinize how this new challenge intersects with existing conditions like social inequity and political negligence, and in turn engender effective, sustainable change.

Above all, the pandemic has recast the human body as "broken equipment": a locus of vulnerability and suffering rather than one of agency and empowerment that is deserving of care and empathy. Given how the coronavirus has weaponized our bodies against our own interests, it is unsurprising that the pandemic has popularized military language. The all-too-recognizable language of war readily lends itself to the uncertainty and vulnerability of the pandemic, its familiarity offering us much-wanted linguistic respite as we grasp for past stability. Enloe suggests employing phrases such as "emergency footing" and "struggling together" to convey the importance of communal effort without sacrificing a sense of urgency. Drawing on Heidegger, I offer the concept of resolution: it focuses on problem-solving, giving room to describe both immediate and long-term problems, from developing a vaccine to remedying systemic injustice. At the same time, it signals the importance of resolve: the resolve to acknowledge that our actions reverberate beyond ourselves and act with a view towards common wellbeing. Implicit in the concept of war is the eventual reversion to peace, and that entails erasing what has been learned and revealed during war. A more appropriate attitude to take towards the pandemic, then, is not a forgetful nostalgia for an illusory past peace, but what Heidegger calls a retentive resoluteness towards future possibilities (Heidegger 2008).

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