

# Cosmos, Worlds and Republics: Notes on the Occasion of the COVID-19 Pandemic

WOLFGANG HEUER

**ABSTRACT:** Viruses and pandemics are part of an overarching ecological theme that encompasses not only climate and plants, but all forms and conditions of life. This requires a far-reaching change in perspective. Not only does biodiversity, following Alexander von Humboldt, form a common “cosmos” across the globe, but we humans are also part of it. This natural sphere corresponds to Arendt’s concept of the “world” on the social and political sphere. Cosmos and world take the place of the old irreconcilable separation of nature/barbarism and culture/civilization. Consequently, the threat to cosmos and world does not come from nature but from man-made devastation. Biodiversity and human plurality can only thrive with the principles of environmental/political sustainability.

**KEY WORDS:** pandemic, biodiversity, Arendt, Humboldt, cosmos, world, nature

When the virus appeared in early 2020, many Europeans, including myself, were slow to acknowledge its actual existence. Initially, we believed it was exclusively a Chinese problem, then that it was comparable to the ordinary flu, and finally, when decisive action had to be taken, that the pandemic would last no more than a few months. None of this corresponded to reality, not even the assumption that pandemics like this were rare and could be nipped in the bud and rendered harmless by vaccines conjured up at high speed.

All of these assumptions were based on wishful thinking: the pandemic is a temporary disruption that neither questions the system nor sees it as the cause and can therefore be successfully combated by the system. This assumption led to the belief that pandemics constitute an extreme case of ruthless invasion and

can only be eradicated with an extreme antidote, that is, “war” (Macron). Given the estimated 1.7 million different viruses, 500,000–800,000 of which could infect humans, what is the best metaphor for this kind of logic—should we take note of this statement in the IPBES 2020 report (IPBES 2020)?

The instrumental discourse on the pandemic saw the ecological discourse on phenomena such as climate change, species extinction, and the littering of the world’s oceans recede into the background, despite the obvious connections. The IPBES report gives a highly plausible explanation of how deforestation, the expansion of agricultural land, wildlife trade and consumption, and globalized contact routes have contributed to intensifying the contact between viruses and humans. Hence viruses and pandemics are an integral part of an overarching ecological issue that not only addresses climate and the plant world, but life in all its forms and conditions. It is therefore not a matter of distinguishing between magnificent healthy nature and a quasi invisible deadly virus, but rather of the interplay of life’s phenomena in all their diversity.

Is the pandemic not an additional reason to look at and understand the world from an ecological point of view? Does it not call for a far-reaching shift in perspective, one that sees ecology not exclusively as a scientific field of expertise or an area of alternative environment exploitation, but as a habitat? Are anthropologists/philosophers like Philippe Descola, Baptiste Morizot, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro or a forester like Peter Wohlleben not helpful companions who bring us close to “nature,” who question this term and from there present the various perspectives we have so far considered to be real and normal (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft 2020)?

This shift in perspective would see us as part of biodiversity, no longer as beings whose mental capacity allows them to separate themselves from other life forms, to rise above them and to oppose them. With reference to Alexander von Humboldt, I would like to call this shared world a cosmos. Indeed, there is yet another commonality associated with this cosmos that involves the social and political sphere, namely, what Hannah Arendt calls the world, the space of intersubjectivity. “Cosmos” and “world” replace the old irreconcilable separation of “barbarism” and “civilisation” and of “nature” and “culture.” In both Humboldt and Arendt we find a positive Enlightenment legacy that escapes its traps of rationalism and subjectivism. Finally, as a third element pertaining to a shift in perspective, Arendt’s reflections on institutionalizing the world lend themselves to a discussion on the republic that is not based on the dichotomous exclusions implied by concepts such as people, nation, or sovereignty, but on power sharing, federation, and diversity. Can we bring biodiversity, cosmos, world, and republic together to form a common perspective based on spatiality, participation, networking, and intersubjectivity, i.e., develop our own method of accessing the world? Here are some incomplete considerations.

## BIODIVERSITY

Is it not so that biodiversity, whose gradual destruction is deplored and whose existence constitutes the wealth of life on earth, is of a spatial diversity similar to the cultural, social and political diversity in Arendt? Definitions of biodiversity and of viruses are not uniform, but overlap in line with the development of knowledge, as in the case of exploring climate change or the COVID-19 virus. There appears to be agreement, however, that biodiversity refers to taxonomic diversity of species as well as to diversity within a particular species; genetic diversity within individual species as well as the diversity of organisms within a habitat; the ecological and functional diversity of biotopes and ecosystems, as well as of ecosystem functions such as pollination and seed dispersal; finally, the cultural diversity of animal behaviour (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft 2020). The entirety of species diversity is unknown, but estimated at several tens of millions. The degree to which human intervention has caused its destruction is only partly known. The number of vertebrates, for example, has fallen by 60 percent since 1970, and by 90 percent in Central America for the same period. Germany has seen approximately 75 percent fewer flying insects since 1989 (WWF 2020), a decline in both taxonomic and genetic diversity.

But it has taken the so-called bee mortality to attract general attention. Bees, along with endangered insects, pollinate three-quarters of all crops. In the thinking of the Old World, the loss of bees is serious in so far as it can be expressed in currency, US\$ 500 billion per year, but supposedly bearable because the disruption to the system can be offset with cash.

Indeed, species interactions are crucial to ecosystems, as the latter are more stable and better able to compensate for disturbances if they are species-rich rather than species-poor.

Should we not constantly bear these figures in mind in order to grasp the scale of the ecological crisis, and at the same time withstand the arid world of such figures and statistics? Behind these figures lies the diversity of existences in their spaces and interactions, which can only be understood if we get to know them and are keen to talk about them. Like Morizot, who learns to understand the migrations of wild animals by observing them, to read their tracks and recognize their world as a space of communication, or like Wohlleben, who speaks of communicative relationships between trees, or Descola, who qualifies our view of nature as merely one of many possible approaches. Their understanding helps us to understand, helps us to perceive what Gadamer described as knowledge that is not science, but the ability to engage with the essence, with the obstinacy of the world, with the inner measure inherent in being.

## COSMOS, WORLDS

But why should we not enhance this shift in perspective even further by looking back in history to the Enlightenment philosopher Alexander von Humboldt and juxtaposing his unspoken criticism of the modern natural sciences with Arendt's pronounced criticism? An encounter of the different disciplines and times would thus promote and enrich the change in perspective (Heuer 2019). Is it then at all surprising that Humboldt and Arendt's methods and ways of thinking, similar to those of the anthropologists mentioned above, are based on experience and the observation of phenomena and are, moreover, cosmopolitan?

During his five-year, often adventurous, journey through the present-day states of Venezuela, Cuba, Trinidad, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and the USA, Humboldt collected countless flowers and plants, and noted down his observations of flora and fauna, soils, mountains and climatic conditions, measured lengths, heights and temperatures, and produced maps. Nature revealed itself to him as a single organism that spans the world, a cosmos in the Greek understanding of world order. He saw a natural whole, not a "dead aggregate" (Wulf 2016: 122), and observed numerous interactions. Humboldt was the opposite of a cool, technical surveyor, nothing associated him with Bacon, who regarded the world as created for human beings, or with Descartes, who basically thought animals were just machines (*ibid.*).

For Humboldt, a multifaceted unity of nature also included people in their exchange with nature, hence his criticism of tree felling and the subsequent soil erosion, but also of plantation management with slavery and oppression. He criticized the slave economy *vis-à-vis* President Jefferson, and as an admirer of the newly created Republic of the United States, lamented the decline of republicanism in favor of utilitarianism (Humboldt 1999: 181–82).

Arendt's critique of the modern relationship to nature is above all a critique of perspective and thus of method. For Arendt, "the Renaissance's new-wakened love for the earth and the world" (Arendt 1958: 240) as a response to the rationalism of medieval scholasticism became the first victim of a new science that was not concerned with nature *per se* but with self-made questions that subordinated facts to laws and made man a "special case of organic life" (Arendt 2006: 260)—not in the ecological sense, of course, but as part of objectifying constructs and formulas that replaced sensory perception, public spirit and language, and led to loss of the ability to judge.

Arendt noted "the almost too precise congruity of modern man's world alienation with the subjectivism of modern philosophy" (Arendt 1958: 248)—from the doubts of Descartes, Hobbes, and English sensualism, empiricism, and pragmatism to the existentialism and positivism of the twentieth century—accompanied by the withdrawal of people into their own self. So, do the experiences of modern times

not show that it is impossible to separate nature, the environment, technology, science, politics, and philosophy from each other, and that in the natural and social sciences as well as in politics, the understanding of nature is similar in each era?

As far as the method is concerned, the pictorial presentation of the research results, which Humboldt presented in his book *Ansichten der Natur* (Views of Nature), is an essential part of the cognitive process and not merely an illustration. For the perception of the outer and inner nature of man not only takes place in the formation of concepts and the emotionlessness of perception and thinking, but predominantly in the world of feelings. Humboldt therefore emphasized “the combination of a literary and purely scientific purpose, the desire to simultaneously occupy the imagination and, by increasing knowledge, enrich life with ideas” (Ette 2001: 49).

Similar to this is Arendt’s mentality, her essayistic, open-minded way of thinking, the use of linguistic images and metaphors to describe the new, her irony, incisiveness, and laughter, and use of poetry and literature to describe moods and politically momentous experiences typical of the time.

Crucial to Arendt’s view of the world is the significance of plurality and the intersubjective space that opens up in action and communication, and forms a “world.” Worlds in the plural could also exist side by side. Should the similarity between biodiversity and the diversity of human existences and that between the interaction of ecological spaces and between these and Arendt’s intersubjective worlds not give us food for thought? Is the stability of the species-rich ecosystems mentioned earlier not similar to that of a diverse human community? And does the destruction of a biotope and that of a human “world,” an oasis in Arendt’s words, through conformity or dictatorship not merely imply the decline into a supposedly barbaric “natural state,” but in both cases the devastation of life?

## REPUBLICS

For Arendt, community stability is based primarily on active interaction, but also on the institutionalization of plurality, which should be sustainable, transparent, and cosmopolitan. Plurality and freedom are institutionalized through the separation of powers and federalism (within and between republics) (Heuer 2018), sustainable with a positive concept of freedom, transparency, participation, and mutual recognition as well as political and social justice, and finally, cosmopolitan not only because of the spatial dimensions of globalization but also in the knowledge of the Humboldtian cosmos.

According to Etienne Tassin, a globalized world must preserve and enable the ecosystem of all living things, the cultural assets of peoples, and the plural communities of political actors in the form of ecology, ecumenism, and cosmopolitanism (Tassin 2011: 15).

Arendt's judgement theory based on perspective diversity and enlarged mentality is particularly cosmopolitan. This kind of judgement is independent of spatial location and challenges us, if need be, to take up any location on earth. It is solely our attachment to the body that prevents us from cutting across our subjective location. Fortunately, imagination allows us to rise above this boundary, at least to the extent of putting ourselves in the place of others and thus in a position to develop a sense of community. Detached from spatial proximity or distance, the validity of cosmopolitan judgement "would be neither objective and universal nor subjective, depending on personal whim, but intersubjective or representative" (Arendt 2003: 141).

Is the emergence of the current pandemic not a fresh opportunity to reflect on the relationship and interaction between ecological, political and—unusually—methodological sustainability?

Free University Berlin

## REFERENCES

- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2003. "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2006. "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Descola, Philippe. 2005. *Par-delà nature et culture*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Ette, Ottmar. 2001. "Schreiben in der Moderne," in *Aufbruch in die Moderne*, ed. Ottmar Ette et al. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Heuer, Wolfgang. 2018. "Plurality," *Arendt Studies* 2: 51–60.  
<https://doi.org/10.5840/arendtstudies201821>
- Heuer, Wolfgang. 2019. "Cosmos and Republic: A Hidden Dialogue between Hannah Arendt and Alexander von Humboldt," *Russian Sociological Review* 18(4): 284–97.  
<https://doi.org/10.17323/1728-192x-2019-4-284-298>
- Humboldt, Alexander von. 1999. "An Varnhagen von Ense, July 31, 1854," in *Über die Freiheit des Menschen. Auf der Suche nach Wahrheit*, ed. Manfred Otto. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel.
- IPBES (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services). 2020. *Workshop Report on Biodiversity and Pandemics*. New York: United Nations Environment Programme.
- Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. 2020. "Biodiversität: Vielfalt des Lebens." Available at: <https://www.mpg.de/biodiversitaet>.

- Morizot, Batiste. 2018. *Sur la piste animale*. Arles: Actes Sud.
- Tassin, Étienne. 2011. "De la domination totale à la domination globale. Perspectives arendtiennes sur la mondialisation d'un point de vue cosmopolitique," in Hannah Arendt, *Le totalitarisme et la banalité du mal*, ed. Annabel Herzog. Paris: PUF.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2015. *Metafísicas canibais*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify.
- Wohlleben, Peter. 2016. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World*. Vancouver: Greystone Books.
- Wulf, Andrea. 2016. *Alexander von Humboldt und die Erfindung der Natur*. München: C. Bertelsmann Verlag.
- WWF. 2020. "Living Planet Report 2020: Bending the Curve of Biodiversity Loss." Available at [https://www.wwf.ch/sites/default/files/doc-2020-09/LPR20\\_Full%20report\\_pages\\_EMBARGO%2010.09.20.pdf](https://www.wwf.ch/sites/default/files/doc-2020-09/LPR20_Full%20report_pages_EMBARGO%2010.09.20.pdf)