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Prospectus for a Viral Future: “The Giving Plague”

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If the Covid-19 pandemic has clarified anything, it is that natural disasters are never exactly natural. In this instance, the apparently ‘natural’ emergence of a species-jumping novel virus to which we are not immune was made much more likely by the structures and practices of economic globalisation, the world we all inhabit, just as its global spread has followed the international routes of traffic, trade and travel. Moreover, the likelihood of being infected or killed by the virus is a consequence of human economic, social, political and cultural structures and processes.

That everyone knows this, however unconsciously, is evident all around us. All that racist conspiracy theory nonsense about escaped Chinese bioweapons and 5G technology was just faulty folk reasoning – sometimes exploited to other ends – trying to cognitively map global complexities. Melodramatic villainy offers a simple solution, curtailing the potentially infinite regress of a paranoid hermeneutics, and provides emotional rewards by articulating, rationalising, and confirming – rather than challenging – fears and prejudices. It is just so much easier to perpetuate tired old yellow peril fantasies than wrestle with the technical obscurities of pathogen spill over and transmission vectors.

It can also be seen in the rush to profit from disaster, and in the willingness of governments to abruptly re-designate ‘unskilled labour’ as ‘essential workers’, forcing many of the lowest paid to risk greater exposure – and then to blame them for fresh outbreaks. It is just so much easier to pretend there is no connection whatsoever between deepening immiseration here and windfall profits there, and to tattle tabloid tales about ‘the feckless poor’ and ‘the reckless youth’, than to address socioeconomic structures or undo a decade of ‘austerity’ that has robbed so many of health and healthcare, of support systems and services, of financial buffers and rainy-day savings, of dignity, joy, life.

Of course, it does not help that viruses are entirely natural but seem deeply unnatural. They lurk in a liminal zombie zone. They are alive, because they contain genetic material, arrange for their own

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reproduction and are subject to natural selection. At the same time, they are not alive, because they cannot metabolise and do not reproduce by cell division. Their lipid envelopes and protein coats bundle together both nucleic acid and ambiguities.

‘The Giving Plague’ (1987), by scientist-turned-sf-writer David Brin, thrives upon such in-between-ness.² It takes the form of a retrospective first-person monologue addressed to a virus that may, or may not, have infected the narrator. In the future from which he speaks, Forry carries a ‘forged card ... saying my blood group is AB negative’ and others warning that he is a ‘practicing, devout Christian Scientist’ and ‘allergic to penicillin, aspirin, and phenylalanine’. He will do anything to avoid a blood transfusion.

As a younger man, this self-serving biologist from Texas was obsessed with hierarchy, fame and material rewards. He yearned to win a Nobel prize. But his ambition far outstripped his abilities. So, he hitched his wagon to a star – to the British ‘Boy Genius’ virologist Leslie Adgeson.

Forry is almost sociopathic in his alienation from others. Seeing the world as a war of all against all, he unsurprisingly finds the ‘rapacious insatiability’ of a virus, its ‘simple, distilled purity of ambition’, fascinating. He knows that viruses are neither living nor intentional, that their very existence is nothing more than the blind chance of evolution, but he *feels* that their seemingly malicious behaviour might be planned. Teetering on the edge of paranoia, he imagines his scientific labour as warfare against viruses, in which labs are funded to ‘come up with better weapons for our side’. Adgeson, in contrast, finds beauty in the structure of a virus, in the way a seemingly lifeless thing nonetheless replicates itself.

As Adgeson explains, the relationship between a species and a virus (or other pathogen) is normally conceptualised as a cycle: the virus goes from being harmless, before it finds a host, to lethal, when it does; then, as the host species develops immunity, the killer becomes a survivable illness, and then a mere inconvenience, and then harmless once more. But Adgeson is intrigued by another possibility. What if the struggle between virus and host is actually a negotiation? What if inconvenience becomes benign parasitism, even symbiosis? What if long after the pathogen has ceased to be experienced or even discernible as an invader, as a disease, its needs have already altered human behaviour? This prompts Forry to wonder whether, in order to produce a transmission vector, ‘some past virus cause[d] a swelling of the lips that made us want to kiss?’

Because of a (real-world) panic over HIV transmission through blood transfusions, Adgeson interviews a lot of blood donors. One subject has donated blood for over forty years, and admits that when he reached the age limit of sixty-five, he moved to a new address and lied about his name and age so he could register at a new blood bank. Adgeson discovers other such ‘addicts’ and a number of ‘converts’,

² Published in *Interzone* and shortlisted for a Hugo, it was later collected in *Otherness* (1995) and is currently free online at <<https://www.davidbrin.com/fiction/givingplague.html>>.

people who became enthusiastic blood donors after receiving a transfusion during surgery. In fact, this Acquired Lavish Altruism Syndrome (ALAS), this desperate urge to give blood every couple of months, is the vector – both the method and the consequence – of a virus.

When Adgeson delays publishing his findings, hoping the unchecked spread of altruism will save the planet, Forry decides to murder him and steal the research. To avoid suspicion, he will have to wait several years before announcing the discovery. But before he can act, Adgeson dies of Catastrophic Autoimmune Pulmonary Collapse (CAPUC). In the long quest to find a cure for this viroid, Forry more or less forgets about ALAS. He goes to work for the World Health Organisation and wins many accolades, even a Nobel – albeit only the Peace prize, for his role in the ‘Final Campaign Against Malnutrition’.

A new spirit of cooperation and mutual aid sweeps the world: ‘Peace treaties were signed. Citizens of the industrial nations voted temporary cuts in their standards of living in order to fight poverty and save the environment. Suddenly, it seemed, we’d all grown up.’

Then a Mars mission returns, carrying a new and deadly pathogen, TARP. Billions die. Less than 15% of children survive, half of them infertile – and that is only in countries ‘who’ve had a lot of racial mixing. Heterozygosity and genetic diversity seem to breed better resistance. Those peoples with “pure”, narrow bloodlines will be harder to save’.

Forry perseveres through the catastrophe of this anti-racist plague, surrounded by ALAS-infected ‘marionettes’ who merely ‘think they’re acting altruistically’. His uncharacteristically self-sacrificing behaviour might on the surface be no different from their generosity, but he *knows* he is acting under his own volition – ‘even a rat’ recognises that ‘when there’s no other port in sight’ it is time ‘to join in the fight to save a sinking ship’. But one day soon, he will be able to turn his attention back to waging war upon ALAS and to saving other uninfected humans from its puppeteering.

Meanwhile, in ‘the streets, where the teeming clinics fester and boil’, he works long hours at great personal risk to save lives. And although he carries all those fake cards to avoid a transfusion, he does regularly give blood.

‘The Giving Plague’, which twice evokes the image of Britain’s selfish Conservative voters, is a riposte to the right-wing, neo-liberal backlash against Keynesian amelioration of the free market depredations.³ Written midway through the decade in which the HIV/AIDS retrovirus was identified, it deploys viruses to challenge the fantastical figure of the monadic competitive rational subject common to both liberal thought and capitalist orthodoxy – a wet dream cranked all the way up to eleven in the neoliberal claims that there is no such thing as society and that There Is No Alternative.

Neoliberalism likes to imagine the qualities of such a subject are somehow natural and normal, despite being a historically contingent constellation, distributed very unevenly not only across and among

³ Useful introductions to neoliberalism and neoliberalisation include Harvey, Mirowski and Plehwe, Peck, and Slobodian.

cultures and populations, but also within individuals in their day-to-day lives and across their lifetimes. In the 1980s, hypercapitalism's attack-dogmatists evoked the concept of the selfish gene to assert that humans are inherently selfish. For such ideologues, who presumably had either not read, not understood or deliberately misrepresented Richard Dawkins's argument, which itself was never exactly the consensus view of evolutionary biologists, this chromosomal 'human nature' was identical to the 'rational actors' of their unreal economic models.⁴

Oddly, they also often claimed that everyone acting purely from self-interest would produce the maximum good for all – although they never did explain why selfish individuals would even care about this fanciful outcome, no matter how magical its workings might be. Still more contradictorily, at the same time as reducing humans to mere automata, driven by an immutable nature pre-determined on a genetic level, they would also insist that capitalism produces and guarantees freedom – and above all the freedom to choose.

In a similar vein, Forry is unable to fathom the ambiguities of his own existence. He insists that he does not have ALAS, but acts as if he does, so is he infected or not, and does it matter? How many of the other people behaving altruistically are doing so because they have ALAS? And how many of them are uninfected but nonetheless observing, whether consciously or not, the newly-dominant social conventions? Does altruism exist other than as an expression of the virus? Or does the practice of mutual aid actually appeal to co-operative values we already also share? Are those co-operative values an expression of our genes? Are they a consequence of an earlier and still-unknown virus developing a transmission vector? Could self-interest also have arisen that way?

In contrast to Forry, Adgeson has a more biologically informed sense of humans. We are not monads, pristine and distinct. We are composed of many other commensal species. About 57% of the body's cell count is made up of bacteria, viruses, fungi and archaea; the human genome contains about 20,000 genes, but our microbiome has up to 20 million. As Brin's story suggests, and as the Covid-19 pandemic has amply illustrated, we are – each of us, and all of us – the precarious and contingent sum of biological and social interconnections. And, like a Möbius strip, the biological and the social each become the other.

Almost a century ago, another scientist/sf writer, Alexander Bogdanov founded the Soviet Union's Institute for Haematology and Blood Transfusions. He believed that the sharing of blood enhanced physical and social health. That transfusions were a comradesly exchange of life. That from the material

⁴ Intriguingly, in one of the chapters added to the 1989 'new edition' of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins mulls over a question often posed by 'sociologists and psychologists': why 'do blood donors (in countries, such as Britain, where they are not paid) give blood'? He writes: 'I find it hard to believe that the answer lies in reciprocity or disguised selfishness in any simple sense. It is not as though regular blood donors receive preferential treatment when they come to need a transfusion. They are not even issued with little gold stars to wear. Maybe I am naïve, but I find myself tempted to see it as a genuine case of pure, disinterested altruism' (230).

interconnections of the physiological collective a better politics – and a transformed world – could emerge.⁵

And if the Covid-19 pandemic has clarified anything else, it is that that would not be a bad idea.

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⁵ Elements of these ideas can be found in his sf novellas, *Red Star* (1908) and *Engineer Menni* (1913), and poem, ‘A Martian Stranded on Earth’ (1927), all collected in Bogdanov. For introductions to the life and thought of this leading pre-revolution Bolshevik and proto-cyberneticist, see Krementsov and White.