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THE FUTURE OF THE PAST
Memory and social change following the COVID-19 pandemic

Brady Wagoner and Lisa Herbig

Contemporary culture contains many bits of wisdom distilled from political and social thinkers that express the connection between the interpreted past and strived for the future. Many will likely have heard that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (first formulated by philosopher George Santayana and then Winston Churchill) and that “history repeats itself. First as tragedy, then a farce” (Karl Marx’s statement about Napoleon III) or “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell’s 1984)? These phrases appear in everyday conversations and official communications alike to remind us of how the past is not dead and gone but remains active in the present, organizing our orientation to the future.

What these statements do not tell us is precisely how the past is constructed (through what processes and means) and why this has implications for the future. The present chapter aims to look at how resources drawn from the past are used to shape an emerging memory of disorienting events, and how in turn this memory shapes the interpretation of new events. The principal means by which this memory is constructed, we argue, are images, metaphors, and narratives. These are not only tools of communication and sense-making, giving structure to complex events, but they also add an emotional and moral valence to them that motivates action in a given direction.

While still within the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth thinking about what the emerging images, metaphors, and narratives of this period are and what future they orient us toward. Moreover, can we cultivate them to set us on track toward a better future? This chapter begins by analyzing how an emerging memory of the 9/11 terrorist attacks was forged and the during impact that it has had in orienting us to the future. It then goes on to reflect on some of the emerging images, metaphors, and narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic and their potential orientational function. For this, data from a study in German on the public’s response to the pandemic is used (see viralcomm.org). As a final step, the chapter asks the question of how memory of COVID-19 pandemic might be used to understand and approach the impending climate change crisis.

9/11 images and the War on Terror narrative

Before reflecting further on emerging images, metaphors, and narratives of COVID-19, it is worth starting with an example that we can approach with hindsight to illustrate the past-present-future dynamics we have introduced. Images of the airplanes hitting the twin towers...
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have become deeply embedded in our collective memory, evoking imagery of a projectile going through a human body. However, when we first saw them, they created a disorienting situation. The first author personally remembers hearing about it from a friend in university and not being able to imagine a large commercial plane hitting the towers. Even after he had seen a visual image of the destruction, there was no narrative available to make sense of it. It was only in the post-9/11 world that a narrative template became widely available for making sense of terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe. The image of the plane hitting the twin towers now functions as a condensed, emotional symbol of this narrative which was constructed mainly by then-president George Bush and other neo-conservative politicians in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack.

In the days after 9/11, Bush set out the task ahead: “Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil” (speech from prayer service on 9/12). The evildoers were, according to Bush, Islamic terrorists that “hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (speech given Congress on September 20, 2002). Of course, those who orchestrated 9/11 cared little about American freedoms; American foreign policy in the Middle East was the point of contention and motivation for the attacks. However, the speeches provided a simple and powerful storyline to give meaning to 9/11: the freedom and peace that the United States stands for, was attacked unprovoked by a foreign radical Islamic enemy that represents the exact opposite. This in turn set up an orientation to the future—namely, the invasion of Afghanistan to rid the world of terrorism (opposed by only one US senator).

Despite its aims to present a neutral account, the 9/11 museum at ground zero partially falls into the trap of this narrative of an unprovoked attack on the land of the free. The museum explicitly aims to focus on what happened on the day of 9/11, developing the idea that the attack happened “out of the blue” (using the literally blue sky seen in photographs from that morning as a metaphor to understand the attacks). Starting the narrative on that day and location, strips it of the historical and political context that might problematize the “out of the blue” metaphor. Where one starts and ends the narrative can help to generate very different moral conclusions about events.

Thus, the United States was positioned as having a moral obligation to rid the world of terror and evil. Bush’s famous slogan a “war on terror” is somewhat bizarre in that “terror” is an enemy tactic, not the enemy as such. The “Global War on Terror” provided a narrative template that was affectively charged with the horrific images of 9/11 that could conveniently be applied to new unrelated contexts, such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Once the narrative template became established, it was used so automatically that, for example, the initial global media reaction to the July 22, 2011 terrorist attack in Norway was that it was conducted by an Islamic terrorist organization. In fact, it was perpetrated by the Norwegian ring-wing extremist Anders Breivik. This is what is referred to as “pre-mediation” in the field of Memory Studies (Erll, 2018).

Images, metaphors, and narratives speak principally to our emotions rather than our reasoning. This makes perfect sense in that rational arguments tend not to motivate people to action. Just think of what is more persuasive to actually becoming a vegetarian: gruesome factory farm images or rational arguments about the ethics of eating animals. Similarly, as any political speech writer knows, one needs to tap into a group’s affects through their collective memory to get the desired result. No American president can, for example, give a speech without using the word “freedom.” Presenting detailed statistics or complex arguments for one’s case are not effective motivational strategies. Le Bon (1885/2002) pointed this out long ago:

Whatever strikes the imagination of crowds presents itself under the shape of a startling and very clear image, freed from all accessory explanation, or merely having as

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accompaniment a few marvelous or mysterious facts: examples in point are a great victory, a great miracle, a great crime, or a great hope. Things must be laid before the crowd as a whole, and their genesis must never be indicated. A hundred petty crimes or petty accidents will not strike the imagination of crowds in the least, whereas a single great crime or a single great accident will profoundly impress them, even though the results be infinitely less disastrous than those of the hundred small accidents put together.

(p. 37)

The brief example of the collective memory of 9/11 should be sufficient to illustrate the power of images, metaphors, and narratives for shaping the future. Like it or not, we are now living in the post-9/11 era in which our collective memory for these events provides a schema for interpreting new events and orienting our actions toward the future. Unfortunately, the way these events originally became interpreted and used has had disastrous consequences—mostly directly (but not limited to) Iraq becoming a weak state that provided the perfect breeding ground for ISIS, and the US’s 20-year occupation of Afghanistan that ended in a costly defeat. As such, we would do well to scrutinize the images, metaphors, and narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic and their role in guiding us into the future.

Pandemic images, metaphors, and narratives

How a pandemic ends is never quick and never neat, concludes Mark Honigsbaum (2020) in his extensive historical survey Pandemic Century. Yet people strive to fit these disorienting situations into a narrative form that gives closure and stability to a complex and unpredictable series of events. Most often, narratives that employ war analogies are used for this purpose: We are “at war with the virus”; the government has a “battle plan”; the virus is “in retreat.” Even the computer-generated image of the coronavirus (that has circulated through the global media since early in the pandemic) resembles a naval mine or bomb—symmetrically round with protruding spikes. In fact, the virus looks very different under the microscope—more like an oval blob with fuzzy edges. As much as war metaphors and images may help to garner public support for emergency measures, they are highly problematic in the long run. For one, the virus will never surrender and there will never be an armistice day that provides a definitive endpoint. Moreover, it has the unfortunate connotation that frontline healthcare workers offer a “noble sacrifice” for their country.

While pandemics and infectious diseases more generally may be understood through war metaphors and narratives, they do not tend to be remembered as strongly as actual wars. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, the 1918 pandemic had been largely forgotten, even though it killed vastly more people than the First World War. Part of this was due to information censorship in the war years to avoid negative effects on morale. But this is only a partial explanation as other pandemics likewise fail to be remembered to the extent that wars are. Spinney (2018) describes how the “Spanish Flu” was spatially diffuse and temporally contracted in that most deaths occurred in the first months, while the First World War was concentrated in Europe and extended over years. Pandemics know no national boundaries and as such are less easily nationally framed. Moreover, “the enemy” is not a traditional social foe but an invisible killer that cannot be directly attacked, only defended against. The strong memory for the Black Plague may in part be due to the ability to apply a strong religious frame to events (in the absence of modern nation-states). There is, however, a tendency to “other” viral threats (Joffe, 1999), reinforcing existing prejudice and discrimination, such as the unsubstantiated claim that Jews poisoned the drinking water during the Black Plague.

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We use memory for pandemics as well as wars to (1) make sense of what had happened, (2) understand why it happened, and (3) finally, to anticipate what will happen. Ideally, this opens the possibility to learn from previously unforeseen and traumatic events by imagining potential futures that arise from them. An analogy can here be made to *post-traumatic growth* (see, e.g., van der Kolk, 2014): people that experience traumatic events can benefit from them in the long run, if they are narrativized and future-oriented lessons are drawn. In contrast to war metaphors and narratives, notions of co-existence with the coronavirus are at this moment on the ascendency but not yet fully developed. In what follows, we will draw on interview data from our “viral communication” project (viralcomm.com) that investigated people’s responses to the pandemic situation in Germany, to answer the above questions. Interviews were conducted with forty participants at three timepoints (December 2020, April 2021, and August 2021). Participants were purposively selected (based on gender, age, socio-economic status, and level of trust) from a representative national survey to gather a broad range of different views on the situation.

### Understanding what happened

To make sense of what happened, our interviewees repeatedly related to historical events throughout the interview. Most often, references to the Nazi regime and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were used to categorize containment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in line with police states.

> That reminds me, well my grandpa always says, ‘It starts like 33’. And he’s probably not wrong. The followers were the problem back then, he said, and they are again today.
> (female, 45–59 years, December 2020)

> It’s almost like in the GDR, where the block warden looked to see whether I was going to work or not.
> (male, 30–44 years, December 2020)

In those examples, historical references are not only used to make sense of ongoing events, but also to position oneself within this socio-historical nexus. In the first statement—made by a person that strongly rejects the containment measures, as well as the COVID-19 vaccination—the interviewee positions herself in the family tradition of resistance against the Nazi regime and through that as being on the “right side of history.” She later claims that she will now join the “resistance” and fight against the mistreatment by the state. Also, the second person is using the historical comparison to describe the overall atmosphere of suspicion and distrust prevailing in society.

In general, historical (war) references have mostly been used to criticize the current government and political decision-makers. In comparison, when talking about the overall situation, the images used are more subtle. For example, our participants refer to a “fight” against the virus/pandemic, while also acknowledging that the “enemy” (i.e., the virus) is not a perfect fit with the war metaphor in that we’re fighting an “invisible enemy.”

> So we don’t have to try to fight it in any way, because viruses are usually not very easy to fight, but we just have to live with the situation.
> (male, 30–44 years, December 2020)
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So I sometimes say it’s better to have a [real] war. That the bombs fall, that one knows: if I go out, then I have a big chance to die. That you now have an invisible virus, where you don’t see directly what it does to you; where the young people, the middle-aged people, my age, are convinced: I’m healthy, so it won’t harm me. We underestimate everything.

(female, 45–59 years, December 2020)

We are constantly learning through the pandemic. But the virus also learns and produces mutations. It will always be a battle between mankind and the virus. And I’m afraid we’re not going to get rid of that easily.

(male, 60+ years, April 2021)

The first quote illustrates the move toward a co-existence narrative, while the second quote explicitly recognizes that people do not operate as if they were in a war situation. Unlike the visible dangers of war, people are easily convinced that “it won’t harm me.” Interestingly, in the third quote, the virus gets personified as an intelligent creature that learns and adapts—making it a difficult opponent to win a war against. The futility of fighting a war against COVID is humorously represented by the meme in Figure 29.1.

Understanding why it happened

As previously described, images, metaphors, and historical comparisons are not just used to make sense of the current situation but also to understand why it happened. Our interviewees widely recognized the virus’s origins in China and attributed its rapid and international spread to today’s highly interconnected world. Within this general frame, several more specific images emerged, such as the coronavirus as a natural force that is out of control and cannot be stopped:

The origin was China. And how did it come about? Well, nobody expected it, and maybe they could have completely sealed off China. But in today’s globalized world, that wouldn’t really
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have worked and sooner or later it would have spread. These are just things like... nature well. It's just like a storm, you can't just turn it off. These are just things that happen again and again and I mean one person is enough to infect the whole world.

(male, 30–44 years, April 2021)

As with many pandemics in world history, interviewees also blamed hygiene in China for the spread of the disease. This is part of the widespread tendency to “other” and “moralize” emerging infectious diseases, triggering the “not me, not us, others are to blame” response (Joffe, 1999). This response helps to reduce the feelings of risk to self. Yet, at the same time, the following participant also recognizes that distant others can be a risk in a globally interconnected world.

[… throughout history there have been constant epidemics, and that has reduced with better public hygiene. Everywhere where there’s running water and good waste disposal and so on. Then there are much fewer epidemics, but that something like that breaks out from time to time, I think that’s inevitable. […] So we can only believe what the Chinese say. […] Or we have to fantasize something. But that seems perfectly plausible to me, by the way, because in the markets in East Asia, […] the hygiene is not always so exemplary. That’s why I’m not surprised that something like this happened. Of course, it spread very quickly. But even there I must say, in the Middle Ages the plague originated in China, and a year later it was also in Europe. Not 14 days later [...].

(male, 60+ years, April 2021)

Others were more suspicious of the Chinese government’s role and the virus research laboratory that happens to be in Wuhan, where the outbreak began. Many people thought the accidental lab leak narrative made sense, while others saw more sinister intentions in the research being carried out there. The second quotation is particularly interesting in its use of a historical analogy to the Second World War:

No, I think so too, because there is a lot of information actually and a lot that can be questioned. Personally, I actually think that there was really research on a virus in China and that an accident happened.

(male, 30–44 years, April 2021)

Bioterrorism. That’s been around for a long time, you talk about it and you see in science fiction movie, but it’s current, it’s nothing of the future. […] Anyone can create a virus. It seems that it is not so difficult. There are a lot of laboratories. […] But the general humanity doesn’t know that yet. Interviewer: That there is also research on biochemical weapons in these laboratories?

30: Of course. Also for military purposes. Yes, of course. We haven’t had a war for a long time, like the Second World War was. That is all history.

(female, 45–59 years, April 2021)

Imagining what will happen

In looking to the future, people from our dataset came up with contradictory visions and hopes. The two following quotes draw upon historical comparisons to imagine a possible future, ending up with a more pessimistic—or maybe rational—conclusion. While the first
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person imagines a revival of the “roaring twenties” in Europe, the second envisions a “normal” life “like before” the pandemic. Both agree that there won’t be big changes or lessons learned.

Yes, so I don’t think that something like that changes society in a big way. [...] so after the first world war and after the great flu, which was much more tragic than, than COVID today. After the great flu there, it’s not that people started to live particularly carefully. On the contrary, the twenties were then the time of wild parties.

(male, 60+ years, April 2021)

[... after the pandemic, I hope it will be [... like before. Yes, I mean, we have had the Spanish flu, we have had the Swine flu, we have had crises. [...] We managed to contain other viruses and other diseases in such a way that we had a relatively normal life again

(male, 45–59 years, April 2021)

On the other hand, many of our participants draw positive lessons from the pandemic, including the importance of slowing down and reflecting on what’s important in life. Interestingly, those visions for the future are reported on a more personal level and don’t include historical comparisons or as many metaphors.

Yes, that it’s good to maybe just come to rest. To come to a standstill and just think about goals, things. Important things and perhaps also simply unimportant things [...].

(male, 30–44 years, September 2021)

The bottom line is that this pandemic actually reduces you to the most basic things. To a very narrow circle of people and you also have a lot of time to reflect on yourself and think about yourself, of course.

(female, 16–29 years, September 2021)

The pandemic has been a catalyst for numerous people to change their life trajectories. For example, many people around the world have chosen to leave their dead-end, meaningless jobs, creating a global supply crisis. As has happened after several pandemics in world history (Snowden, 2019), workers’ positions of negotiation have improved such that they are able to demand better conditions and higher wages. In the early 20th century, John Maynard Keynes had said that we could be working 15 hours weeks and still maintain a high standard of living, given technological productivity increases; yet in the early 21st century, people are as busy and frantic as ever and productive jobs replaced by machines have given way to the administrative “bullshit” jobs. Graeber (2018) argues that in creating a sense of meaninglessness, “bullshit jobs” are both psychologically and socially damaging. The pandemic situation essentially put a wrench into the “social acceleration” of society (Rosa, 2013), thereby giving us space to question our lives and basic values. Beyond personal changes to our lives precipitated by the pandemic, it has also inspired some thinking about societal futures. In the next section, we will consider how the pandemic has been used to interpret and anticipate the challenge of climate change.

From COVID-19 to climate change

In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, people have already begun to draw comparisons between the COVID pandemic and the climate crisis. This association also came up in our interviews, even though there were no questions in our interview guide on climate change.
(or other crises in general). The first quote shows that people are concerned about the pandemic diverting attention away from the issue of climate change, while the second quote demonstrates how people compare those two issues and find similarities between the two.

*The Covid pandemic has in principle diverted attention from one of the key issues, namely climate change.*

(male, 45–49 years, September 2021)

*Similar to the climate crisis. Many things that I think about the pandemic, I also think about the climate crisis.*

(male, 60+ years, December 2020)

Likewise, many memes circulating on social media and messaging apps, also illustrate the COVID pandemic as a comparatively small issue within the larger climate crisis. Those images position the current pandemic within the larger context of climate change as the bigger threat in the long term, activating future scenarios and anticipating huge risks and challenges ahead.

In general, we can identify three major ways in which the COVID pandemic is used to relate to climate change, as a warning, a possibility, and an inspiration. Each will be discussed in turn.

**A warning**

The notion of animal-to-human transmission of viral infection, known as “zoonosis” or colloquially “spillover,” has received more public attention in the wake of the pandemic.
Zoonosis occurs as humans encroach on natural habitats, forcing animals to live in smaller areas and increasing their chances of becoming ill. Moreover, the encroachment makes contact between sick animals and humans more likely. Add to this the globally interconnected world, already pointed out in participants’ comments above, and we have an explosive situation.

And that’s the next big thing that might threaten humanity even more than now somehow environmental risks or war risks. […] The deeper causes are of course environmental destruction, biodiversity, that biodiversity is being wiped out, that so many are being deprived of their natural environment by robbing nature. That’s what’s behind it. That perhaps it’s already no longer five before twelve, but already five after twelve. I’m skeptical that anything will change, but I would say that these are the causes. That’s where it comes from, from not treating our environment or living environment with respect.

(male, 60+ years, December 2020)

[…] nature always wins. So when a virus comes along, you notice it’s changing, it’s always mutating, when we thought there was a solution, then the virus comes along and says ‘Okay, next mutation, […]’. So for me, nature is the winner in all of this.

(female, 30–44 years, September 2021)

The virus is considered nature’s way of “fighting back” in response to the destruction caused by human beings. Pandemics and other disasters will follow if humanity’s course of environmental devastation continues to be pursued, and in the end, “nature always wins.”

A possibility

One of the most striking features of the pandemic was how quickly governments responded to it. Overnight governments implemented measures to contain the virus that sent economies into slowdowns and brought to a standstill the mobility that many have become so accustomed to. If this can be done in response to the coronavirus, why can’t they also act quickly on climate change? The pandemic and the slowdown it caused have helped give people space to be more attentive to such issues:

I1: What lessons do you personally draw from this time?

37: Well, I don’t know what we could change in our behavior to avoid such things, they can no longer be avoided, but simply also, as far as the environment is concerned, even being more attentive, but that’s what we’re doing at the moment anyway. […] Whether the pandemic is a reinforcement of that, yes, it could be.

(female, 60+, September 2021)

An inspiration

Nature can return when we give it time to heal. Already in March 2020, newspapers reported that without the stream of tourists, fish could be seen in Venice’s canals and dolphins in its port once again. Other parts of the world also reported a return of wildlife to cities, whose inhabitants had retreated indoors to avoid catching COVID. Given time, nature will take over once again as has happened at sites like Chernobyl, following the nuclear disaster there.
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Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has thus shown us some valuable lessons for the future if we are ready to hear and act on them. We would like to think that the disruption to the normal order of things created by the pandemic situation has forced us to reconsider our lives and that of the planet in a new light. Human beings can use this as an opportunity to understand both our fragility in the scheme of nature and agency in changing our relationship to it. The pandemic has confronted us with hard existential realities as individuals, societies, and humanity as a whole. As a commission on “the value of death” has recently argued, “Climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental destruction, and attitudes to death in high-income countries have similar roots—our delusion that we are in control of, and not part of, nature.” (Sallnow et al., 2022, p. 1). Thus, the narrative, image, and metaphors that we hope people can move into the future with are that of an interconnected globe, where other people, organisms, and natural forces are part of a delicate, entangled relationship. It is little surprise that environmental groups have adopted the image of the globe seen from space as one of their principal symbols, given how clearly it illustrates the inherent unity of the planet and all its life forms. In this spirit, we applaud the “World Memorial to the Pandemic” currently being built in Montevideo (Figure 29.3). To us, it helps forge the right narrative, metaphor, and image of the pandemic moving forward. Not only does it avoid remembering the pandemic within a national frame, but also de-centers human being within the environment. Visitors listen to the sound of waves and are surrounded by the vastness of the sea, reminding them that human beings are subordinate to nature and not the other way around.

References


