

"Pierre Tap and intellectual timelessness: reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic"

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SUMMARY

As part of the 9th Conference on Intercultural Mediation and Social Intervention, under the theme "Living, Coexisting and Surviving in a Pandemic Context (Covid-19), for the opening panel - *Intellectual Timelessness: Testimonies and Experiences in the First Person*, Professor Pierre Tap, Professor Emeritus of the University of Toulouse, author of several world-renowned books, was interviewed with the aim of understanding his experiences and reflections in times of pandemic. This open-ended interview included 5 guiding questions, which will be explored throughout this article under 5 themes: the experience of confinement; the parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and other plagues and diseases of the past; the marks the pandemic will leave on society; the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, responsible for the COVID-19 disease; and the relationship between disease, life and death.

KEYWORDS

Pierre Tap; Pandemic COVID-19; Experiments; Disease, life and death.

This virus, scientifically designated as SARS-CoV-2 and nicknamed COVID-19, was first identified in humans in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Characterized by rapid contagion in the population, it will be classified by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 as a pandemic. In this context and in view of the increasing number of deaths worldwide, many countries have announced several mandatory health measures, including the rule of mandatory home stay, limited public

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services and essential services with specific rules, such as supermarkets, pharmacies and health services.

The experience of confinement

In the context of this period of recollection during the pandemic, Pierre Tap, already retired at the age of 83, says: "Of course, I am a privileged person, I have learned to live well what can be a problem for others: to manage loneliness, to live as a couple in a positive context between family, friends and neighbors . During this time, many of us have heard the word "loneliness" and its connection to what I have called "boundary work": the willingness to do or not to do, to say or not to say... the way I deal with the boundaries that others impose on me, that nature or illness imposes on me, my relationship with death. Since my adolescence, I have learned to live many situations in solitude, by professional necessity, but seeing its usefulness by the quality of the work provided. For example, in 1979-1980, I spent 10 days a month in a monastery to finish my state thesis, leaving my wife to manage the family and our 3 children, leaving my colleagues to manage the research laboratory, the team and the projects. I can say that during the confinement, I did not have to suffer from loneliness, as many people do, especially since I live serenely as a couple, in a quiet town in Aveyron, in a house that allows my partner and me to manage the daily routine in a ritualized way" ... he adds that: "at the age of 83, rituals are useful! In addition, family members or friends and neighbors have helped us by doing some of the shopping. However, the ability to order from home has been very helpful! In the small apartments, family or couple life posed many problems to others during the lock-in.

As an intellectual with extensive experience in the field of psychology, with unique intellectual capacities for reflection, Pierre Tap speaks in the first person about his own experience, and how he occupied his time during the imposed confinement in France, stating that "in fact, my occupations between 2019 and 2021 are the continuation of research work related to education, health, work, social action". The co-direction with Jacques Curie of a research and development laboratory (CNRS) entitled "Personalization and social change" (1978-1991) obliged us to constantly articulate the sub-disciplines of psychology. During the pandemic, we published with Nathalie Oubrayrie-Roussel, professor at Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, a book entitled "Personnalisation et dynamique relationnelle" in which we defended "personalisation" as the development and fulfilment

of the person in social interactions, and ~~not~~ to be confused today with "mass personalisation", in the sense of personalising my purchases and goods. Considering this daily reality, I will mention what has been the most striking for me during this period, the negative aspects, but also the positive ones. "

On the negative side, Pierre Tap discusses: the unfairness in the effects of the pandemic, in the face of death; the massive increase in psychological disorders up to depression and suicide, especially among students; the massive increase in domestic violence (over 50% in one study in Italy), especially violence against women; the inability of psychiatric services to meet the demand; the inadequate way in which the state has responded to the need for psychologists; the emergence of an *anti-health*: conspirators to the horrible "health shoah", using the yellow star in a shameful way.

On the positive side, he identifies: the existence of greater mutual aid and solidarity between the population and caregivers; the historical mobilization of psychologists to defend their profession and its skills; the importance of ongoing scientific research on confinement and the effects of the pandemic.

Parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and other parasites and diseases of the past

There are some differences between these past events: viruses at the origin of pandemics, geographical extent of the epidemic, global or at least continental pandemics, national or regional epidemics, differences in the place of emergence of the disease. In this section, Pierre Tap discusses differences related to the type of virus or disease: the Black Death, yellow fever, cholera (1926) influenza (Spanish, 1918 Asian), typhoid fever (in Athens, 430 BC ¼ of the inhabitants died), smallpox (the Antonine Plague was a smallpox epidemic: 166 AD 10 million dead).... AIDS and its origin (HIV or Human Immunodeficiency Virus (1980) global pandemic (cf. theses in Toulouse): one million people still die of AIDS each year (WHO).

According to Pierre Tap, "science can sometimes discover the origin of an epidemic that killed millions of people: between 1545 and 1550, 15 million Aztecs died of the disease known as *cocoliztli*, two researchers from the Max Planck Institute have analyzed the DNA of 24 victims of this epidemic. They found that 10 of these DNAs contained traces of salmonellosis, a disease that was probably brought by the conquistadors (there were

no traces in the DNAs before 1520 Hernan Cortes). But the problem is how to assess the number of deaths associated solely with salmonellosis?

In the field of differences by geographical origin of the pandemic, for example, the great European plague of 1347-1342, also came from China, brought by the Mongols in the ports, then from India, and up to Messina (Sicily) by various ships, then from Marseille. 200 million deaths on 400 million inhabitants in the world! This highly contagious plague, called the Black Death, affected both rich and poor. Pierre Tap, **reports** that "the poets will show the importance of the ethical and cultural consequences of the pandemic", in this sense, he gives as an example the famous image of the "macabre dances", evoking that "the drawings, charnel houses, where emperors, popes, kings and bishops can die: we are all equal in front of death! Each drawing represents the dance of death with everyone, regardless of their social position! "



Figure 1: Danses macabres - late medieval art-literary allegory on the universality of death

For Pierre Tap, the poets will show the importance of the ethical and cultural consequences of the pandemic. Also using Italy as an example, Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio (author of the *Decameron*), highlight the flaws in the culture and the need for change.

Boccaccio, a young man who survived the terrible Black Death epidemic that ravaged Florence in 1348. Inspired by accounts of the hardships felt by the population, Boccaccio imagines the story of 10 young noblemen (7 girls and 3 boys) who meet in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, with the aim of leaving the city to take refuge in a rural environment where they could escape the contagion of the plague. In this country house,

during a 10-day "confinement", they designated the queen or king of the day and, under his or her reign and according to the theme chosen by him or her, each one in turn had to tell a story of his or her own, a total of 100 stories. According to Pierre Tap, these stories allowed for a better understanding of the future... his work on *Illustrious Men and Women*. In this sense, the *Decameron* is undoubtedly a metaphor for literature, linked to the possibility of being locked up in a world apart, where far from the difficulties experienced at the time, each person can return even more alive.



Figure 2: The *Decameron* - Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio

The marks the pandemic will leave on society

The negative psychological effects of quarantine, particularly during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, have recently been highlighted. According to a meta-analysis of 24 recent quarantines, the research work of Samantha Brooks and her team at King's College London (2020), reveals the negative psychological effects of the quarantines analyzed, with examples of post-traumatic stress, depression and suicides.

Pierre Tap mentions in this regard that he had the opportunity to write in his 2021 book - *Personalization and Relational Dynamics* - "that we must (correctly) move from masks to brands". "But society is already well imbued with all kinds of brands: identity brand, financial and economic brand (with mass customization, companies use the personalized diversification of brands and products to stand out!) So we must differentiate pandemic brands between individual, family, associative, societal and institutional brands. "

Individual and family markers: post-traumatic stress, various traumas caused by the multiple events experienced by the person. Much has already been said about the

consequences of the pandemic on mental health, on the way people experience changes in work style and experience, on the re-launch of school and professional learning, on family and marital experiences, etc. These effects will persist, sometimes becoming chronic difficulties.

Prolonged confinement strongly disrupted the functioning of sports groups, cultural associations and shows, and friendly or festive gatherings. One could observe reactions of exaggeration and exasperation of compensatory behaviors, but one could also witness the positive emergence of artistic productions, and the rebirth of relationships of help and solidarity.

In this respect, Pierre Tap adds "... ~~if~~ scientific psychology always tries to anticipate in order to improve the help to people in difficulty, to understand the aspirations, the hopes of people...". But where does the anticipation end, **and** where does the dream or utopia of a happy tomorrow and a paradise for all begin? "

In this respect, Pierre Tap cites the example of the two titanic books by Yuval Noah Harari: "Sapiens", a brief history of humanity (500 pages) and "Homo deus", a brief history of the future (450 pages). In "Sapiens", Harari rightly points out, on page 321, that "science, by definition, has no claim to know what should be in the future. Only religions and ideologies seek to answer these questions. " On the 11th page of "Homo deus" (from the future), the author states, "In recent decades, we have been able to control hunger, epidemics, and war. Of course, these problems have not been completely solved (but it is possible to meet the challenges of nature). Faced with remarkable failures, we create a commission of inquiry to know "who" screwed up (the person responsible) and how to reduce the mess! and it "works"! **(we see with the war in Ukraine that a commission is not enough!)** But what are we going to do **(positively)** with our immense powers (biotechnologies, information technologies...)? ".

The origin of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, responsible for COVID-19

A global study by WHO (2021), in collaboration with China, on the origins of SARS-CoV-2 indicates that the most likely scenario is transmission from bats to humans via another animal. Simian viruses have already been detected in pangolins. However, other animals such as mink and cats are also susceptible to Covid-19, suggesting that they may carry the virus and transmit it to humans.

The researchers also analyzed the hypothesis of a direct transmission from food products, but this one was classified as unlikely, just like the laboratory origin, often underlined. The conclusions published by the WHO (2021), considered that it was "extremely unlikely" that the spread of the coronavirus was due to "a laboratory accident", arguing at the time that the most likely scenario was transmission by an animal, not yet identified.

A paper published by the U.S. journal *Science* contradicts the World Health Organization's (WHO) report from early 2021, which highlighted a Chinese *accountant* as the first case of COVID-19 in the world. In this study in the journal *Science*, researcher Michael Worobey (2021), after an investigation of health facility records in the city of Wuhan (the Chinese city where the first infections were reported), points out that a seafood vendor in the Wuhan market is believed to be the first known case of the disease, with an onset of symptoms on December 11, 2019. Live mammals susceptible to the coronavirus were also sold at the site, including raccoon dogs, a species native to Asia.

On July 23, 2021, China announced that it had suspended the World Health Organization (WHO) investigation that was taking place on its soil. For Pierre Tap "This is because two hypotheses have been made: Either the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus is said to have a 'zoonotic' source, i.e. a disease originating in animals and transmitted to humans (such as bird flu, for example); or it is the result of an accidental leakage of the virus handled in the laboratory. "

Pierre adds that "China conducted a giant publicity campaign to 'prove' that the virus (reported in Wuhan) was in fact of foreign origin (via frozen fish). Scientists have refuted this hypothesis. In any case, the resurgence of the virus in Chinese regions little affected by the influence of fish markets, forces them to keep quiet. However, Chinese researchers are active. For example, they have informed the world that the virus is contagious 48 hours before symptoms appear.

The hypothesis retained today is of "zoonosis" type, the virus is associated with bats. They have had the virus "dormant" in their bodies for decades. But the virus cannot be transmitted directly to humans. We would have to find the intermediary (another animal) that could have served as a transmitter (between 2013 and 2019). In this sense, Pierre Tap wonders: "Can the virus disappear? Only the smallpox virus has disappeared. However, it is possible for SARS-CoV-2. A lot of research has been done on the survival of the virus once it is released into the air. Currently, the research shows the need for great care!

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COVID-19, relationship between disease, life and death

For the WHO (2022), the official figures of actual mortality due to the covid-19 pandemic have already exceeded 5.5 million. This figure is already much higher than most viral epidemics of the 21st and 20th centuries, with the exception of the "Spanish flu" and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). However, this figure may be underestimated, as the number of deaths depends on the results of various initiatives launched to estimate the number of victims of the infection, and may in fact be much higher.

In this regard, Pierre gives the example of France, noting that "on July 21, 111,576 people died of COVID-19, 73% of whom were 75 years of age or older, 58% were men (2% were 44 years of age or younger). In another study comparing 4 European countries, the rate of COVID-19 deaths aged 70 years or older was 84% in France, 87% in Spain, 86% in Italy and 86% in Germany. "Faced with these data, Pierre emphasizes by saying, "Obviously, we see the danger of misusing these figures: the dead are equal in front of death, regardless of their age, sex or place in society (as indicated by the image of "macabre dances"). "

In this regard, Pierre Tap pays tribute to three great researchers, two of whom died in 2021 and the third of whom is still with us, having become a centenarian during the month this interview was conducted. The first researcher, Romain Gaignard, 87 years old (1934-2021), president of the University of Toulouse Le Mirail (1996-2001), then honorary president, former director of cooperation and international relations at the Ministry of Education, died on February 14, 2021 of COVID-19, a few days after ~~the onset of the disease.~~ The Institut des Amériques (scientific interest group, CNRS, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), of which he was one of the co-creators, ~~has just paid him~~ a vibrant tribute "in memoriam" for his activities as a geographer and a Latin American.

In a personal account of illness during a pandemic, Pierre says, "I'm lucky to be alive at 83. But last April, I was hospitalized for "heart failure" (when I thought I had a good heart!) and I now have a pacemaker. "They saved my life", which will now run its course! But this was not the case for our friend Axel Kahn, who passed away on July 6, 2021, after sending a letter to his Internet friends to inform them that he would soon die. Stricken with cancer, he became president of the Ligue contre le cancer. He says he didn't have to

go far from his office as president to his room (in hospice care)! "He was president of the University of Paris V. Descartes University. A physician, director of research at Inserm, expert in genetics and immunology, he also developed research on ethics and humanistic values.

Pierre Tap, ends the trilogy with a tribute to his friend Edgar Morin, who was born on July 8, 1921 and who, therefore, became a centenarian in July 2021. Stressing that he has admired his ideas and work since the 1960s. "He was the first author cited in my first research on film (Ikon, International Journal of Filmology, 1963)! Like him, I believe that connection, mutual aid, cooperation and love must become the driving force for a change in civilization and a struggle to defend our planet. Beyond conviction, we must find the collective Know-How to promote change in this direction! "

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