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On epidemiological ruination

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“[W]e live now ... in a time of ruination,” Brian Dillon wrote in the catalogue for a 2011 exhibition on ruins. The twenty-first century is already marked, he claimed, by recession and war, and “flourishing [with] images of catastrophe and decay”. Now, we witness the economic ruins of COVID-19: town centres and public spaces emptied; shops shuttered; workers ‘furloughed’. A week into lockdown, wild goats descended into Llandudno – a Welsh seaside resort, already struggling in the age of cheap (now grounded) air travel – nibbling at vacant gardens and shitting unmolested in silent streets.

Historian E.P. Thompson’s classic essay on the transition to industrialised capitalism traces the shift from rural, pragmatic perceptions of diurnal time to a modernity in which “time-discipline was rigorously imposed” (1967: 85). For Reinhart Koselleck (1985), *revolution* – industrial, democratic – negated its own cyclical semantics, creating a distinctly modern *Neuzeit* in promises of future limitless progress. The anthropology of temporality has long de-centred capitalist, Eurocentric linearity, teasing the ontic (time passes) from the

ontological (we reckon that passing in different ways). Crisis time calls attention to *Neuzeit*'s fragility.

Crisis decelerates life, accelerates ruin. Under COVID-19 lockdown, daily life dawdles. Work time-discipline, usually carefully counted, gives way to household rhythms. Suspended business hours invite browsing goats. And yet, time becomes equally of the essence: can the state keep up with its self-imposed urgencies? Will hyperbolic death rates (temporally dislocated from infections) peak, or emergency measures prove inadequate? Audit cultures realign in rankings of epidemiological spread and bureaucratic speed. Time has become a cat's cradle. Economic ruin proceeds apace.

We, authors, have separately sought to theorise ruinous temporalities: for one of us, ruin haunts a post-industrial present; for the other, ruin presages post-Anthropocene ecologies. An anthropologist and geographer,¹ each located within Europeanist ethnography, we find our perspectives drawing together as epidemiology re-figures time and spaces. Ruins, we are reminded, become quickly.

Death – economic, rather than corporeal – leaves a spectral mess. Ghosts are coldly familiar in places that economic change has, in Brexit-era parlance, 'left behind'. Conceptualising 'afterlives' has already offered a way to ethnographically frame the enduring presence of economic absence. And, afterlives, we would argue, are all the more salient amidst epidemiological ruination. Already, out-of-bounds streetscapes memorialise past mobilities. Already, as economic graphs veer wildly, afterlives of the crisis itself are sketched into a horizon of expectation (Koselleck 1985) that assumes ruin can and will be reclaimed – that assumes a *re*-turn to the future perfect. Expectations are temporally laden: how quickly? How long? But, what ruin will remain?

¹ An early casualty of COVID-19 cancellations was the UK Royal Anthropological Institute and Royal Geographical Society's first joint conference.

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