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Of virus and hunters, an interview with Frédéric Keck (versão em inglês)

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NOTA DO EDITOR

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- 1 Frédéric Keck is one of the main figures of the contemporary anthropology of biosecurity. He graduated in philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and at the Université Lille-III, also in France. After an experience at the University of California, Berkeley, he migrated to anthropology under the influence of Paul Rabinow. In the field of intellectual history, he published several works on the development of French anthropology and its relationship with philosophy, exploring the ideas of authors such as Auguste Comte, Lucien Lévi-Bruhl, Émile Durkheim, Henri Bergson and Claude Lévi-Strauss. About the work of the latter, he wrote an introduction published in Brazil in 2013 by publisher Contraponto¹.
- 2 After joining the CNRS, the French National Council for Scientific Research, Keck conducted research related to the monitoring of emerging zoonoses, with an ethnographic focus in East Asian countries. This experience resulted in books such as *Un monde grippé*² (2010), and the most recent *Avian Reservoirs*³ (2020). Between 2014 and 2018, he taught and served as director of research at the Musée du Quay Branly in Paris. He is currently director of research at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale of the Collège de France. In this interview, conducted remotely during the months of confinement resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, Keck tells us about his trajectory, research experience and visions about the pandemic, taking up themes with which he worked over the years while also exploring new comparative possibilities.

Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo C. Bulamah - Maybe we could start with a more general comment regarding your own work. We know that you hold a PhD degree in philosophy and that since your early career you showed a great interest in figures from the field of anthropology such as Lévi-Strauss, Lévy-Bruhl, Rabinow and Descola. How did East and Southeast Asia become a major field of interest for you? Also, we see in your research a great influence of what we could name the anthropology of techniques alongside with the recent ontological turn, could you please tell us about how this relates to your focus on human-animal relations?

Frédéric Keck - I have been interested in China for a long time, particularly since I read the works of François Jullien⁴, who promoted a radical comparison between Chinese and European thinking. But I became interested by Asia as a continent when I studied anthropology at UC Berkeley with Paul Rabinow, and realized that the urban landscapes which shape globalization could also become objects of ethnographic study, as well as the wild forests of Amazonia or central Africa which were more classical t(r)opics in French anthropology. I learned with Rabinow how to analyze the ethical contexts in which biotechnologies came to circulate in the 1990's. With the universalization of genetic sequencing as a language to code life, it became possible to compare the perceptions of viral mutations in various moral landscapes. What I find interesting in discussions about emerging infectious diseases is that small viral mutations trigger major social changes when they cross species barriers. By following technologies of surveillance and securitization, the anthropologist shifts scales from the molecular to the geopolitical. The comparison between China and the West becomes one of the levels at which emergences can be described. This is where I connect an anthropology of techniques with the ontological turn. I started with a cultural question – how does China think about life at threat? – but then I did anthropology of techniques – how do Chinese scientists prepare for future pandemics? – and then I came to an ontological question – how can we perceive viruses when they cross species barriers?

Caetano and Rodrigo - This is fascinating. Could you tell us more about this scale shifting between the molecular and the geopolitical, maybe focusing on your take on ethnography? But before diving into your empirical work, we were curious about how you ended up in Berkeley and how you approached Paul Rabinow's work. Would you mind explaining what role this academic exchange played in your career?

Frédéric Keck – I came to work with Paul Rabinow because I was interested by the convergences between Michel Foucault's archeology of epistemes and Clifford Geertz' anthropology of cultures. Rabinow was quite reluctant to such totalizations; he was more interested by small events, such as the invention of PCR⁵, and their capacity to amplify material information such as genetic sequences. In *Making PCR*⁶, he compares these small events to what Lévi-Strauss calls bricolage, and that was for me the starting point for a new kind of anthropology, starting from what Agamben calls bare life⁷ (material information circulating between species and between societies) to see how they are amplified in political forms of life. This process of amplification was for me the trigger to shift between scales. When I read *La pensée sauvage*⁸ cautiously, I realized that it is the process of the “totemic operator” that develops a dialectical movement between levels of abstraction. And I also found the same idea in Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*⁹, where tensions in life forms are amplified by the life of signs. This is how I moved away from Lévy-Bruhl and Jullien's comparison of mentalities to follow viruses across the globe.

- 3 Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo Bulamah - In your most recent book, *Avian Reservoirs*¹⁰, you describe the varied techniques used by microbiologists in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore to prepare for potential pandemic outbreaks. You also argue that these techniques align with the ways hunter-gatherers relate with non-human animals and their environments in general. This is a thought-provoking argument, and seems to be a key idea to understand the differences between the three paradigms for dealing with zoonotic diseases you analyze in the book—prevention, precaution and preparedness. Can you tell us a bit more what a ‘sentinel’ is, and to what extent its use by contemporary epidemiological surveillance brings virus hunters in Eastern Asia closer to indigenous hunters in the Amazon and other contexts.

Frédéric Keck - I built the concept of sentinel by contrast with the concept of sacrifice. When I started my research on zoonoses, there was a debate about the precautionary principle as a way to legitimize the massive culling of animals suspected to carry infectious agents transmissible to humans. There are many positive aspects of the precautionary principle as a way to open debates about risks, but I was struck by the fact that the maximization of risks by the precautionary principle led to major burdens for animal breeders. There was also a debate about animal welfare in the livestock industry and the rise of vegetarianism as a response to food safety crises. When I started working on the management of zoonoses such as avian influenza in Hong Kong, I discovered that chickens were used as sentinels of pandemics in poultry farms: they were not vaccinated and placed at the entrance of the farm to raise alarm on the presence of the potentially pandemic flu virus in a place where it could be amplified. Since a sentinel is a soldier going to the frontline to bring back warning signals, I became interested by this intraspecies communication in the context of a global war against emerging viruses. Even if sentinel chickens most often die, I found it more stimulating to think of sentinels not as sacrificing themselves to protect humans but as communicating with other species on a frontline. This allowed me to connect the work of “virus hunters” to the modes of communication described among Amazonian hunters by Philippe Descola or Eduardo Kohn. Their point is indeed that the ontological operations engaged in hunting are not sacrificial: they do not aim at producing symbolic meaning by analogies but they produce intraspecies communication between interiorities or selves. I took this Amazonian lesson back into the debate about biopolitics of global zoonoses to argue that virus hunters do not “make die and let live” animals, as in Foucault’s definition of pastoral power, but rather “imitate animals and differ the moment of death” by techniques of preparedness such as sentinel devices, simulation by exercises and storage of data. I also argue that if techniques of preparedness have cynegetic aspects, they are always mixed with pastoral techniques such as sacrifice, scenarios and stockpiling, because virologists have to work with other public health professions. My ethnographic work is critical in that I distinguish sentinels and sacrifice to open possibilities of moral hope and ecological care from the work of virus hunters.

Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo Bulamah - Still in relation to your recent book, you argue that SARS and avian influenza outbreaks revealed geopolitical dimensions that connected Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore to China—and in a way to the rest of the world. Drawing

from this ethnographic analysis, what do you make of this new coronavirus pandemic and China's growing geopolitical presence in the globe?

Frédéric Keck- The argument I make, based on observations of the geopolitics of SARS and avian influenza, is that sentinels are in a competition to produce the most attractive warning signals, that would trigger a sense of security without panic. This argument is based on Amotz and Avishag Zahavi's theory after observing sentinel birds in the Neguev desert, who compete to produce what they call "costly signals" which display their value in prey/predator relationships¹¹. The Zahavis compared this competition between birds to the relation between immune cells who transmit information about viruses without being destroyed by them. Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are three small territories on the frontiers of China which, after SARS, developed technologies to send early warning signals of the emergence of pandemics from inside the "workshop of the world". China is not the predator or the enemy in that game, but the failure of China to send early warning signals of pandemic viruses gave an asset to these three territories on its borders. What has been described by journalists as a tension between the Chinese dragon and the Asian tigers was in fact a competition to send clear signals of the emergence of a pandemic virus in this area connected to the rest of the world – where Japan, South Korea and Vietnam also play a crucial role. When SARS-Cov2 emerged, we saw that China had tried to build its own system of sentinels, with a lot of viral information sent to scientific journals and shared on open databases at the beginning of the pandemic. But because early warning signals were not followed by public health mobilizations, because sentinels didn't turn into whistleblowers, China lost the crucial time to stop the pandemic.

Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo Bulamah – We are both particularly interested in how invasive species mobilize historical experiences and racial imaginaries. One of the first things that called our attention was a sort of externality in the way Europe and the Americas understood the spread of Sars-Cov-2, epitomized by the idea of a "Chinese virus" linked to "exotic" and "dirty" eating habits. There are also several conspiracy theories circulating about the virus origins around the world these days, most of them professed by relevant political figures. How do you see China reacting to these images and what this tells us about China's geopolitical projects?

Frédéric Keck – Based on available genetic sequences of the SARS-Cov-2, the hypothesis of its emergence in the wetmarket of Wuhan is less and less probable, because it doesn't explain how it became so contagious. But this hypothesis was privileged by Chinese scientists because it followed the scenario of SARS and could lead to precautionary action by closing the markets. The global spread of images showing Chinese wetmarkets with bats and pangolins is disconnected from ethnographic realities, since bats are consumed mostly in Southeast Asia and the traffic of pangolins has been highly controlled in China in the last few years. The hypothesis of a viral escape from a lab where experiments to make bat viruses contagious among humans remains probable, even if it will never be proven. Both scenarios of origin cast China as a place where biosecurity is dubious, where all kinds of dirty practices are going on, where ethical virtues lack and living material abounds. China has responded to these criticisms with an aggressive diplomacy of the "fighting wolf" which contradicts its pretension to be a peaceful leader of global health. The model of control of the population by digital technologies is quite scary. I am more interested to understand how the Chinese government takes the opportunity of this crisis to reorganize the allocation of resources and prepare for future ecological crises.

Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo Bulamah - One of the most controversial issues raised by the current pandemic has to do with the compulsory use of masks in the public space. On the one hand, East Asian societies, such as the ones where you conducted your fieldwork, seem to have a peaceful relationship with this prophylactic accessory. In countries like France, Brazil and the US, on the other hand, wearing a mask has become a positional sign in a major cultural war. In a recent article, you said that if France acts on the recommendation to make the wearing of masks compulsory for necessary outings during the pandemic, 'it will mean a real Revolution in norms governing behavior in its public space'. Why is there so much resistance against wearing masks in western societies compared to those in East Asia? Do you see this resistance happening in France and the US (and maybe Brazil) as having the same motivation?

Frédéric Keck - Wearing surgical masks in the public space has become a habit in East Asian societies since the SARS crisis. It has been conceived as a sign of modernity since it was promoted by the Chinese doctor Wu Lian-Te at the time of the pneumonic plague in 1910. It is a sign of respect of others in a country where atmospheric pollution and emerging respiratory diseases are growing problems. By contrast, in Europe, wearing a mask in the public space is linked to the threat of Islam. When East Asian societies started wearing masks after 2003 based on exemplary models and not state obligation, the French Republic prohibited wearing the Muslim scarf in public schools. The definition of the modern citizen as presenting oneself with an open face in the public space probably has some Christian roots, by contrast with Greek and Roman valorizations of masks (persona). In the American continent, not wearing a mask is also conceived as a sign of virility by contrast with wearing a mask as a sign of vulnerability. I am struck by the fact that in Chinese the word for surgical mask literally means "technique to cover one's mouth" and doesn't refer to the idea of hiding the face. Resistance to wearing a mask reveals different conceptions of the person in environments surrounded with invisible entities. I am also surprised by the fact that little echo has been made to the experimental studies on guinea pigs which showed the efficacy of masks in limiting viral transmission between cages – as if humans resisted to conceive their analogies with guinea pigs wearing masks in front of a virus on which we still have very little knowledge.

Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo Bulamah - What you tell about the word for "surgical mask" in Chinese is quite illuminating. In a sense, it reminded us of Lévi-Strauss' account on the role of technical objects at the end of *The Origin of Table Manners*¹². So, for him, while cutlery, adornments and clothing have the role of protecting subjects from external impurity, for Amerindians, these objects safeguard the world's purity from the impurity of subjects. Thus, inspired by this mode of thinking, he proposes a "well-ordered humanism", capable of putting the "world before life, life before man, the respect for others before self-love". Do you see any connections between Lévi-Strauss' propositions and Asian societies' behavior towards masks as instruments to prevent contagion as a collective threat? If so, do you think it opens possibilities of moral hope and ecological care, as you said before?

Frédéric Keck - An investigation realized among Japanese citizens in Tokyo in 2011 shows that half of them wear masks regularly against all kinds of environmental pollutions and that most of them want to protect themselves rather than protect others. This is quite a disappointing result if we think of Lévi-Strauss's hope in the capacity of Japanese civilization to reverse Western conceptions of object and subject. But we would need to invent ethnographic tools to understand what we mean by "protecting oneself" and "protecting others" when we wear masks. A surgical mask is mostly a sign of awareness of the possibilities of contagion by air transmission, which resonates with all kinds of environmental alerts on pollution,

climate change etc. When we breathe, as Emanuele Coccia¹³ reminds us, we are in connexion with living beings who have produced the air, particularly plants. The question of aeration of public buildings is a major concern after this pandemic, to avoid working in closed spaces favorable to the transmission of diseases.

Caetano Sordi and Rodrigo Bulamah – To conclude, we are seeing many public intellectuals disagreeing on the consequences of the pandemic in the near future. While Giorgio Agamben made dire predictions about the intensification of exceptionality ruling over “naked life”, Slavoj Žižek saw in the Covid-19 crisis a signal of exhaustion of global capitalism (Chinese state-ruled capitalism included), and an opportunity to overtake it. Byung-Chul Han, conversely, foresees a shift in biopolitical governmentality after the pandemic. He suggests that it will be less focused on territorial control and closer to the digital, algorithmic surveillance model already in place in some Asian societies. What is your position regarding these predictions? Are we in a good position to foresee anything, whatsoever?

Frédéric – My diagnosis is that pandemic preparedness has relied on what I call cynegetic power : the capacity to anticipate human diseases by the surveillance of microbial mutations among animals. This was an optimistic take on biopower, which is often described as an encompassing form of power. In the use of sentinel devices, I see alternative relations to living beings than the dilemma between sacrifice and surveillance which is at the heart of biopower. The question for virus hunters is a question of bricolage: how much information can we store to make sense of unpredictable events ? This is a question of cryopolitics, which may be the form of cynegetic power within modernity¹⁴. This is also a positive reading of reservoirs as places of conservation where humans pay attention to the role of biodiversity in protecting them from diseases. I cannot predict which form of power will encompass others after this pandemic, because I think the cynegetic power and pastoral power have always been mixed since the domestication of major animal species by humankind. I prefer to study how microbiologists predict based on what they see in the lab, which I think is a fascinating technique of divination.

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