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The Return of Narratives Conference Report | Crisis Narratives and the Pandemic

Tanja Wagensohn & Paul Vickers - University of Regensburg

This report reflects upon the 2022 annual conference of the ScienceCampus and its partner institution the Center for International and Transnational Area Studies. The contributors looked at the COVID-19 pandemic from a multidisciplinary and multiscalar area studies perspective, considering its social, political and cultural impact and framing in various parts of the world.

An original version of this report by Tanja Wagensohn appeared in German on the news pages of the University of Regensburg website. Paul Vickers then translated that text as the basis of this extended English version, including additional passages and material. The conference outline, mission statement and programme can be found here.



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Simple ideas, messages, stories that explain the world: these are things people need and use to create meaning. And all the more so when the complexity of the world becomes all too apparent. Stories and narratives are particularly effective when they address emotions, thus contributing to the ways we construct realities in our mind. Narratives help individuals to position themselves in society and find a place in an increasingly complex world. It could be argued that narratives provide answers and clarity amidst the confusion that intensifies during periods of crisis.

Over three days in May 2022, the international conference Crisis Narratives and the Pandemic, held at the

University of Regensburg (UR), explored critically the diversity of crisis narratives that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic and its broader consequences. The event was organized by the Center for International and Transnational Area Studies (CITAS) at UR together with the Leibniz ScienceCampus Europe and America, a joint institution of the UR and the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg.



Image: Julia Dragan / UR

Historical legacies, Expertise, Symbolic authority

Postmodern theory, most famously with François Lyotard, had declared the overarching grand narratives or meta-narratives obsolete. Perhaps, though, this was premature? Following the formal opening of the conference by the President of the University of Regensburg UDO HEBEL, the co-founder of CITAS, the Center's current spokesperson and holder of the chair in Romance studies JOCHEN MECKE expressed his doubts on the obsolescence of narrative in an introductory talk. He argued that COVID-19 is just one of a recent series of crisis events contributing to the revival of the significance and legitimacy of narratives on multiple scales.

Which narratives has the pandemic created and strengthened? What function have they served and what impact have they had? Opening the first panel, Expert Discourses and Counter-Narratives, via Zoom, the historian and ethnographer ANELIA KASSABOVA (Sofia) outlined the intersection of pandemic-related narratives and those connected with Russia's war against Ukraine. She found evidence in Bulgaria of an alignment between supporters of far-fetched claims relating to COVID-19, as well as opponents of vaccines, and proponents of anti-NATO narratives. Some nationalist groups claimed that hygiene measures were evidence of liberal forces' efforts to attack the Orthodox faith. On the second day of the conference, MILOŠ JOVANOVIĆ (Niš, Serbia) continued this religious theme, commenting on the conflict over the use of a single spoon for the entire congregation in communion services of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Some clergymen were convinced that divine powers provide protection from infection. The fraught public debate between a bishop – who ultimately died with Covid – and epidemiologist proved indicative of broader and longer-standing frictions over discursive agency and the social standing of expertise.

A common theme running through the conference was the loss of trust in state institutions, which seemed particularly apparent in Southeastern, Eastern and Central Europe. GÁBOR EGRY (Budapest) commented on the Hungarian government's efforts to counter this impression by using the pandemic as justification for its antagonistic position towards the West and EU. That the pandemic coincided with the centenary of the Treaty of Trianon, which regulated Hungary's post-World War I borders, was used as a narrative device to justify this stance and fuel a sense of injustice. The apparent initial successes of Central and Eastern Europe in stemming the worst effects were framed as justifications for illiberalism, even if sections of the population viewed the narratives as incoherent and implausible. Egrý also correctly predicted the "discursive retrenchment" would come to mark Hungary's position on Ukraine and Russia.

Expanding the scope to the broader East European region, ROBERT AUSTIN (Toronto) argued that the reasons for declining trust could be traced back at least thirty years and the failings of the transformation process after the end of state socialism. He argued that many members of society lack the capacity to deal with crises following experiences of "gangster capitalism", which undermined governance structures and social infrastructures. Migration, too, contributed to the struggle to cope with the pandemic as large swathes of rural areas in particular were left depopulated and thus without sufficient medical care.

KRISTEN GHODSEE and MITCHELL ORENSTEIN (Pennsylvania) addressed these social dynamics in their online keynote lecture, moderated by ULF BRUNNBAUER (IOS Regensburg). Based on their recent book *Taking Stock of Shock*, their talk also included Germany in their considerations of the impact of post-socialist transformation, highlighting the ongoing inequalities experienced in East German regions of the Federal Republic. The pandemic again drew attention to this. Still, much research, however, has left out the former German Democratic Republic from discussions on the consequences of economic and social transition from state socialism. Their lecture called for interdisciplinary collaboration, the use of a broad range of sources and data, from economic datasets to anthropological fieldwork. Any findings should ideally reflect the multiple and diverse experiences both across the former socialist bloc and also within the states forming it.

Framing, Shaming, Blaming

In their papers, ÖNDER KÜÇÜRKURAL and RAHMI ORUÇ (Istanbul) presented their research on conspiracy theories. Part of a large-scale project conducting interviews with students across Turkish universities, they found that anti-capitalism, reflected in scepticism towards pharmaceutical companies producing vaccines, was one recurring inspiration for conspiratorial narratives that were often closer in tone to nationalist claims. Official declarations, adopting a familiar trope of everyday heroism and scientific expertise ultimately winning, struggled to compete. Their studies have also found among the younger generation broader cosmopolitan values and arguments, although in the public sphere these appear weaker than discourses, including conspiracies and nation-centred framings, which express greater certainty and stake a claim to master-narrative status. MARTINA DRESCHER (Bayreuth) also addressed the role of conspiracy and rumour in pandemic-related discussions in Cameroon and how they impacted social trust, both on the everyday scale and in terms of ordinary people's perceptions of state authority and global geopolitical relations.

In an online panel moderated by political scientist GERLINDE GROITL (UR), CHRISTOPHER ANKERSEN (New York) and OWEN KOHL (Chicago), engaged in a fruitful and convivial dialogue over shifting relations between the state and citizens in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ankersen drew on his many years of experience, including collaboration with the United Nations, in analysing the military rhetoric that is infusing narratives. Examining discourses in Canada, the US and the UK, he found that the trope of “good wars” was applied to pandemic-related events, meaning that analogies to Korea or Vietnam, for example, were absent as medical personnel become a defence force, or doctors and care workers found themselves on various frontlines in a struggle against the evil of the virus. He argued that the emergence of rhetorical strategies that appear to unite people all over the world against a common enemy seeks to ensure the censure of those who do not support the struggle. Beyond discourse, however, the military has been brought in as part of pandemic crisis management in many countries, even in Germany, where for historical reasons this is a particularly sensitive issue. Strategically and in praxis, there is evidence, Ankersen showed, of the transformation of the limits of state power.

Racism and attributing blame, actions that often overlap, were present around the globe at the height of various waves of the pandemic. As Kohl showed, the subjects of such discourses in the US ranged across a variety of groups, from laboratory workers through particular migrant communities to “Karens”, “Trumpers” and “Shitlibs”. News reporting used such terms, reflecting the ideologization of news, as well as laying the grounds for further social division and stratification even, undermining narratives of heroism, social unity and solidarity. ALEXANDER PITTMAN (Ohio) presented his research conducted using a hybrid ethnographic approach with students of color throughout the pandemic at a college classed as a Predominantly White Institution. While many students worldwide have commented on and complained about the sense of loneliness emerging from digital-only study, the pandemic overlapped – most intensely in the US – with the protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in late May 2020. While the students of color feared becoming of radical street violence, they also felt particularly intensely loneliness as their digital teaching could not compensate for the sense of community a university might offer nor were they able to join protests easily. Ultimately, though, he found that students’ experiences of the pandemic were conducive to strengthening resilience both towards the demands of Covid-related measures and racist violence, with a “composite counternarrative” emerging through online ethnographic work and group discussions.

Everyday and virtual communication spaces

The contributions to the conference reflected a multi-scalar approach, addressing both the geopolitical and macro-level consequences of the pandemic and their narrativizations as well as the everyday realms of discourse and communication. JELENA MARKOVIC (Zagreb) examined how those experiencing long-COVID symptoms found it difficult to communicate their experiences because they were suffering from something that medical expertise was struggling to frame plausibly. Thus their condition often felt indescribable, leading to further antagonism with medical professionals and in broader social relations that became marked by distance and a lack of empathy.

GALINA GOSTRER (Munich) used an interactive approach to analyse the social interactions of a team of

educators thrust into the world of working-from-home and distance teaching/learning. She focused on the “COVID talk” that permeated their everyday, Zoom-mediated interactions, finding that there was potential for the medium and conditions to flatten some hierarchies and potentially build community as everyday experiences could feature more prominently in discussions.

Shifting from a micro-scale approach, KATRIN HERMS (Paris / Berlin) offered insight into the potential for using Twitter as a big data source tracing broader social trends and attitudes. She focused on the Francophone twittersphere and the ways users’ contributions on the pandemic were framed and re-framed. The retweet function in particular became a way of indicating political preferences and attitudes towards political elites and social discourses. JANA SVERDLJUK (Agder, Norway) and BASTIAAN BRUINSMA (Gothenburg) also drew on Twitter as a resource, using an algorithm to scrape contributions on attitudes towards vaccines, including how they reflected trust, or a lack of it, towards political authorities, experts and pharmaceutical companies. Their research has established a framework for indicating regional differences, including the broad scale of the Global North/Global South, but also in particular regions and countries. They found that in India, for example, there was evidence of how locally-developed vaccines were part of “striving for recognition” beyond the “developing world” framework. Positive attitudes towards science were visible, but overall, though, there was plenty of evidence around the world of a critique of modernity and the potential for populist forces to disrupt progressive claims.

Crisis spaces, spatializing crisis

What is the relationship between the spaces where the pandemic is experienced and factors including poverty, class, development levels and (medical) infrastructure? YAMINI AGARWAL (New Delhi) addressed the issue of online learning in the context of schoolchildren living in Sompur, an impoverished part of New Delhi with some 1.5 million inhabitants. It is rare for girls from poorer families with lower caste status to stay on into secondary education in India. Many private schools presented online learning as an opportunity to offer greater equality to all children, whatever their socioeconomic background. The reality, though, as Agarwal found was much less favourable, with infrastructural deficiencies leaving entrenched inequalities in place, with internet access limited, social prejudices towards girls’ education continuing to play out, while unscrupulous tech-companies offered ultimately unrecognized qualifications.

AVISHEK RAY (Linz, Austria / Silchar, India) also addressed class-inflected spatializations of Indian society that became evident as millions of migrant workers made their way home on foot across the country as lockdowns hit. Some journeys involved trekking hundreds of miles, producing what he called heterologic spaces as human bodies took over car-dominated spaces while defying government demands to stay put, reawakening symbolic associations with previous mass marches in Indian history. The experience of migrant workers revealed the tensions associated with local and global mobility regimes as well as the limits of state power.

Adopting a transregional lens, the sociologist LUKÁŠ NOVOTNÝ (Ústí nad Labem) focused on the consequences of the pandemic for workers who usually commute to work between the Czech Republic and Germany. In this borderland, where the openness enabled by the Schengen agreement had become commonplace, the sudden

closure of borders came as a shock while causing workers' and their families much emotional and financial exhaustion. This was despite the efforts of the Czech, Bavarian and Saxon governments to offer some compensation and support for accommodation, as families were nevertheless left divided or individuals lost their jobs. His study demonstrated the intersection European, national, federal, regional and local actors in efforts to deal with the pandemic on the ground. NINA PILZ (Greifswald) offered a perspective on how the regional and transregional played out in press discourses. She explored how the Baltic area emerged in public discourse as a prominent benchmark in comparing approaches to crisis management. Sweden was a particularly prominent and closely-observed case, likewise beyond the region, with observers in Germany, for example, finding there both "dangerous freedom" and "successful freedom".

Likewise addressing perceptions of other countries' pandemic experiences, LORELLA VIOLA (Luxembourg) explored framings of how Italy dealt with being Europe's initial COVID-19 epicentre. Using a narrative network analysis, she found that this "discourse event" involved northern European countries, especially, resorting to culturalized stereotypes and nationalist frameworks, often dismissing the "stupidity" of Italy while praising their own responses. For MATTHIAS MORYS (York, UK), the pandemic response has produced conditions for a longer-term restoration of Italy's reputation and building European unity, at least in terms of monetary union. Italy's initial susceptibility to COVID-19 – focused on the north of the country – could be presented in terms of a consequence of its global economic connections, rather than because of it being struck hard by the Eurozone crisis. On an EU level, the large financial package agreed relatively frictionlessly for pandemic-related aid revealed crisis resilience that also saw the EU negotiate Brexit and perhaps laid the groundwork for a response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. While economics is often seen as a narrative-free realm, for Morys, European responses to multiple, intersecting crises has provided foundations for a positive narrative.

Violence, biopolitics, culture

Pandemic-related crisis narratives nevertheless often seem to reflect deepening spatial and social differences. In her contribution, ANNE BRÜSKE (Regensburg) presented graphic novels from Chile and Argentina that addressed experiences of the particularly stringent lockdowns imposed in those countries. One such work, *El ano de la plaga* tells ten stories relating to different social groups, revealing the vulnerability of domestic labourers and indigenous workers who found themselves far from their homelands. Violence and aggression towards minorities are a further aspect of experiences of pandemics that were highlighted by RAUL CÂRSTOCEA (Maynooth, Ireland) in a paper that offered not only spatial but also temporal comparison. He examined the discrimination and exclusion of Roma and Jewish communities in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, tracing patterns that have repeated throughout history. These groups have been made into scapegoats during outbreaks of disease, including the plague and cholera or more recently typhus.

The historical *longue-durée* was evident in the paper by ROMANA RADLWIMMER (Tübingen) as she traced colonial illness narratives in the context of biopolitics, which creates structures "administering life and death". Under Early Modern and Modern colonial regimes and slavery, power structures enabled "biopolitical experimentation" that legitimized deaths of weaker groups or blamed victims for illnesses. In certain post-

colonial countries, the COVID-19 pandemic saw the revival of what she considers to be colonial structures, with harsher regimes imposed on minorities and indigenous communities. As these regimes spread to entire societies, what became evident was an inability to empathize with Others or recognize biopolitical power. For RICHARD NEWELL (Sarajevo) such conditions reveal the potential for future mass atrocities, just as in the past across the globe from former Yugoslavia through the Holocaust in Europe to African countries, disease and illness have been elements in mass murder and mass violence, or in narratives attempting to legitimize them.

Post-pandemic paradigm shifts or more of the same?

For MINERVA PEINADOR (Regensburg), there is scope for the pandemic to develop awareness of the significance of the Anthropocene Age, with human activities pushing the planet to its limits through its extractivist, destructive logics. There might be hope for greater awareness of the co-dependence of human and non-human beings, meaning an end to anthropocentric narrative discourse paradigms. Continuing the theme of the environmental implications of the pandemic, while tying into to the broader conference theme of the contingency of mobility and immobility, DANIELLE HEBERLE VIEGAS (Munich) offered an ambivalently optimistic outlook. She discussed a green Brazilian utopia, albeit one where only the rich could experience the “turn to nature tourism”, escaping the city for isolated gated communities. Journeying to the Garden of Eden might only be possible for the superrich with even Utopia being appropriated by imperial logics and libertarian late-stage capitalism.

For JOCHEN MECKE, summarizing the conference themes, it is clear that narratives are back, and in a variety of formats. They are “conquering the social sciences”, other disciplines and the literary works he explored in his empirical paper. The great COVID-19 novel remains to be written he argues. Perhaps this is because the pandemic is ongoing, but also perhaps because for many people, it is just too difficult to make sense of in its full complexity. This is why, he suggested, chronicles and diaries are so far the predominant form of recording pandemic-era experiences in Spain and France, as they can give a reflect of “narratives of the real”, those that purposefully trace the lack of sense and signification, whereas novels seek symbolic sense, cohesion and plausibility.

The conference demonstrated the importance of cross-disciplinary and multi-regional dialogue in trying to map the complex crisis-riven world of today. Addressing an ongoing event that will have seminal significance for humanity and the planet generally proved a useful perspective, as it underlined the contingency of narrative framings. Equally, it encouraged historical reflection, tracing not only parallels in responses to pandemics, but also the power relations and historical, economic, social and cultural legacies that have shaped responses and attitudes.

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