

# Editorial: A disinfected society

Maintaining social connections during processes of disconnection  
in (post-)pandemic times



Current global developments evoke apocalyptic visions and create multi-dimensional insecurities that even the most stringent safety and security policies seem to be unable to appease. In the face of the most challenging global crisis since the Second World War, Etienne Balibar urges us to confront the “absolute uncertainty of the situation we find ourselves in”<sup>1</sup>, and the moral and political ripples that are yet to unfold. Phenomena that have emerged already are new forms of subjugation and humiliation, which are eroding the last remnants of security, trust and guidance, leaving us exposed to the obscure and inhospitable potential of infected minds and bodies. In every corner of the world, people feel powerless against an inescapable shared fate, shrouding humanity in unprecedented passivity and posing fundamental challenges to our concept of freedom. At the same time, our hyper-modernised society reveals itself to be more “reflexive”. It is radically self-aware and able to recognise its shortcomings and issues, it is able to look the precariousness of today’s largely self-inflicted crises in the eye.

Medical and biopolitical strategies were developed in response to the pandemic to protect the individual as well as the collective from the virus. A virus which was imbued with the symbolic weight of a threat entering the individual or social body. Physical and symbolic separations and boundaries were meant to stop this threat in its tracks and provide immunity. The drawing of such boundaries in daily life (restricting care, banning visits, enforcing quarantine) closed off social spaces while the closing of national boundaries and the reimplementing of border controls redrew the rules of national and international relationships, reshaping our symbolic landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Etienne Balibar, *Al cuore della crisi*, Roma: Castelvecchi 2020, 12. Balibar’s thoughts and perspective on the Covid-19 pandemic hold even more relevance today in respect to the climate crisis, and in particular the war in Ukraine.

Social distancing strategies, as adopted by most governments, are a biopolitical decision to protect society through desocialisation. Paradoxically, it seems that society as a whole can only be saved by isolating and immunising the individuals that make up this society. Parallels might be drawn here with modern philosophical interpretations of the mysterious Pauline figure of the *katéchon* (2 Thessalonians 2:6),<sup>2</sup> which offers temporary protection from evil and restrains or prevents it, not through exclusion but inclusion. Protective measures carry and absorb some of the negative burden in order to eliminate the burden. However, getting such measures right is a balancing act. The pursuit of protection can endanger the unity of community.

Throughout history, societies have been characterised by processes of demarcation and immunisation in an attempt to ensure their survival and continued existence across the ages. However, there is always a tipping point at which the strategies of immunisation not only fight external threats but become an internal threat that can unstitch the fabric of society and unravel social connections. We currently experience an ever-increasing tension between the preservation and dissolution of communal life; a tension that finds expression in an emotionally charged dialectic pitting freedom and safety, disinfection and the need for social interaction, the fear of contact and the longing for contact, hygiene measures and fictional cleanliness against each other.

The cover image of this issue visually captures this ambivalence. The photograph depicts a sink at a construction site of Graz Cathedral. It is a place to wash your hands; a profane medical ritual that almost resembles a sacred liturgical act. It merges different anthropological, biopolitical and religious dimensions characterised with perplexing ambiguity. After all, the sink itself, a symbol of hygiene equipped with dispensers for soap and hand sanitiser, is less an image of disinfected cleanliness and more a representation of the illusion, rhetoric and maybe even cynicism inherent in all religious and non-religious hygiene regulations, which already prophetic biblical voices warn against.

In this sense, the most difficult challenge of the pandemic was the ability to appropriately distinguish between protective and restrictive measures on an individual and collective level. Disproportionately extensive restrictions bore the risk of absurd consequences, such as those experienced by school children, people going through illnesses in isolation, and those living in precarious family environments. Clinical categories of the current health emergency morphed into socio-political antagonisms and gave rise

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1970; Massimo Cacciari, *Il potere che frena. Saggio di teologia politica*, Milano: Adelphi 2014; Roberto Esposito, *Immunità comune: Biopolitica all'epoca della pandemia*, Torino: Einaudi 2022.

to new paradigms of division: *immunitas* versus *communitas*, the young and healthy versus the sick and old, open societies versus closed societies, etc. The societal imperative of social and physical distancing to prevent transmission of the virus quickly embedded itself in individual and socio-political bodies and turned efforts of collectivism into collective mistrust. Even though the epidemic and clinical implications of the Covid-19 outbreak are serious, we also need to carefully consider the social and psychological impact of a disinfected society today and in the future.

The current edition of [LIMINA – Theological perspectives from Graz](#) examines pertinent questions of an immunised/disinfected society from an interdisciplinary perspective. History of medicine, cultural anthropology, philosophy, theology, ethics, and empirical approaches all provide valuable insights and input that contribute to the current debate. How does the societal experience of an increasingly intensifying crisis impact the dialectic of freedom and safety? What happens to a community when convivial exchanges, joyous adventures, connection and solidarity are replaced by basic survival and by efforts to achieve and maintain perceived permanent safety and sterility? Which alternative strategies and ways of societal organisation and living can emerge in the ambivalences of this crisis? What will our world look like “post disinfection”?

*Anna Bergmann* starts the discussion by contextualising current social policies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic within historical discourses on disinfection and hygiene. She demonstrates how the experiences of battling plague outbreaks for hundreds of years has significantly shaped concepts of humanity in the modern age. She also traces the developments from pre-modern strategies to alleviate fears of death and the resulting social ruptures all the way to the present. *Massimo Recalcati* explores socio-political transformations arising from the current state of crisis and analyses the emerging rhetoric of freedom in opposition to any restrictions imposed by Covid measures. He exposes its underlying illiberality and instead advocates for an approach that acknowledges the fragility of human life and defines freedom within a framework of mutual responsibility and solidarity. *Isabella Bruckner* investigates the potential for communal life and pockets of freedom despite the limitations posed by the pandemic. She identifies creative practices and instances of everyday conviviality, which she sees as concrete examples of Michel de Certeau’s tactical acts of creativity.

The following articles put the body at the centre of the pandemic experience. *Dorothea Erbele-Küster* offers an interpretation of the biblical purity

regulations in Leviticus 13–14 as demarcating body practices. Accordingly, disease led to social exclusion and was understood as a separation from God. She argues that our response to the pandemic today reflects similar coping mechanisms. Measures implemented to curb the spread of Covid-19 meant that many people suddenly found themselves being treated as “un-touchable”. *Anna Maria König* shines a phenomenological light on touch deprivation and the lack of skin-to-skin contact. Her findings show that vulnerability is not only experienced through touch but the lack of touch. *Reinhold Esterbauer* investigates questions surrounding the concept of hygiene, which we understand to be an essential strategy for the prevention and eradication of disease. He examines François Jullien’s Chinese-influenced approach to hygiene as a philosophy of life and concludes that Jullien’s concept is predominantly individualistic and as such can only have limited implications on a pandemic scale.

The last three articles explore specific as well as fundamental impacts the pandemic and different responses have had on society. *Canan Bayram and Elif Medeni* investigate how communal life within the Islamic Faith Community in Austria was affected by Covid restrictions from a gendered perspective and whether these shifts hold opportunities to make Muslim community life more inclusive. *Eugen Dolezal and Moritz Windegger* offer insights into the impact the pandemic along with its sudden restrictions on social interactions has had on everyday life and how an increased sense of boredom can lead to existential questions. In particular, they critically focus on how people turned to digital media in an attempt to fill this void. *Patrick Schuchter, Klaus Wegleitner and Andreas Herpich* bring the discussion of existential questions to spaces of heightened urgency: hospitals and care homes. They reflect on key examples of lived experiences at the hospice *Veronika* in Eningen unter Achalm in Baden-Württemberg that participants shared in ethics workshops. This final article consolidates the quest for an integrative and balanced approach to human vulnerability and fragility that every article and contributor touches upon from a different perspective.

The [Open Space](#) section of this edition presents a short essay by *Peter Ebenbauer* in which he critically discusses the sacralisation of hygiene measures inspired by the aforementioned cover image of a construction site. The [Open Space](#) further features a poignant drawing by Graz-based artist *Anne Lückl* that reflects the experiences of the pandemic. It is accompanied by thoughts and reflections on the image itself as well as on the particular impact lockdowns had on the arts by *Hans-Walter Ruckenbauer*.

For the first time, **LIMINA** also includes an article beyond the scope of this issue's main theme. *Martina Bär* presents an overview of the magisterial position on the place of women in the Church and in society and its evolution since the encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963). This new section entitled **Open Science** will offer scholars the opportunity to publish their peer-reviewed work even if it does not correspond to the issue's topic as set out in the relevant call for papers.

We hope you find our articles interesting and engaging and that **LIMINA** can be an enriching resource for you. We always welcome feedback, please contact us at [limina\(at\)uni-graz.at](mailto:limina(at)uni-graz.at) if you have any comments or suggestions.

*tolle, lege – take up and read*

*Isabella Guanzini, Ingrid Hable and Andrea Taschl-Erber*  
Issue Editors, on behalf of the editorial team