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MINISCULE STRUCTURES

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by **Yásnaya Elena A. Gil**

Translated by **John Pluecker**

When it came time for the French biologist Jacques Monod to title his extraordinary book *Chance and Necessity: Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, he elected to borrow words attributed originally to the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus. The complete quote by the well-known “laughing philosopher” goes: “Everything existing in the universe is the fruit of chance and necessity.” Rather than enter into a debate about the merits of this quote in the context of the current situation, I’d like to return to the most disconcerting passages from Monod’s book, which provided an entry point into the passionate debate about whether viruses qualify as living beings or not.

Viruses are thought to be biological entities comprised of genetic material that infect cells, where they can reproduce themselves over and over again. Viruses are so tiny that the majority cannot be observed through normal optical microscopes: miniscule structures that transit the space between what is inert and what is alive. Throughout the history of humanity and even before their discovery, viruses have provoked crises and revealed the way that other kinds of macrostructures function in the world.

The novel coronavirus has precipitated a pandemic of COVID-19 around the world and provided a detailed image of a gigantic, socioeconomic structure—capitalism—within which oppressed sectors of the population are terribly vulnerable to the destruction wrought by this disease: communities with limited access to the health system, people unable to follow prevention guidelines due to their economic conditions, or migrants at borders where the violation of their basic human rights has become commonplace. Furthermore, official reports have shown that along with the elderly, people with diabetes, hypertension, or obesity are especially vulnerable to this new miniscule entity.

A considerable percentage of COVID-19 deaths in Mexico are related to these conditions of inequality. By 2015, it was calculated that approximately 415 million people in the world suffered from diabetes, and the ever-growing consumption of industrialized food products paved the way to its rapid emergence in the top ten of fatal diseases. Capitalism as a macrostructure has created entire sectors that are intensely vulnerable to the microstructure of the new virus as it threatens our debilitated immune systems, which were previously undermined by the consumption of processed food marketed through advertising as desirable. By contrast, in large cities, so-called organic food has become a luxury item which people in poverty cannot afford. This extremely tiny virus has made its home in structures already corroded by the social mega-systems that order the world: in a great many cases, the virus multiplies, infects, and destroys those bodies that have already been previously exposed, debilitated, and impoverished by the capitalist macrosystem.

Seduced by the macrostructures, we've been taught to believe that their disappearance is impossible; we believe these structures to be indispensable. Narratives of world history—particularly the history of nation states—center on civilizational milestones that explain the creation of social macrosystems. The transition from nomadic societies to agricultural societies is frequently explained to be a crucial condition for the existence of social stratification that would further develop in urban areas. This state of affairs would later give birth to empires and slave-holding societies with a labor force able to construct colossal edifices that are traditionally narrated as historical antecedents of the contemporary sociopolitical macrostructures par excellence: nation-states. The Mexica empire—its glories and its edifices—are thus narrated as a part of The History of Mexico. The development of a governing class is marked as a sign of development in this positivist historical path that we have been taught to desire. Social stratification is lauded as a necessary condition for societies to transform from being simple villages into city-states at the supposed dawn of history in distinct parts of the globe. We celebrate this path to the construction of social macrostructures. Nonetheless, alongside the wide avenues where the great passages of history in the mega-structured societies have taken place, there have always existed miniscule social structures: communities, villages, towns that repudiated social stratification on the road to a linear, civilizational development. These included nomadic peoples and social systems that have administered a commonly-administered life far from the great centers of civilization, and whose existence at times has not even been recorded by history itself.

This passion for the macro prevents us from registering other possibilities; it leads us to think that a megastructure with a central power like the Mexican State must exist. This fascination with the macro means that when I speak about possibilities for self-governance and about societies based on mutual aid and reciprocity, I often receive responses that emphasize that it can work in small villages, but that it would never work for a metropolis like Mexico City. I answer by inviting them to undertake an imaginative exercise: let's think of Mexico City as a conglomeration of self-regulated miniscule structures based on self-government and reciprocity that establish alliances with other multiple miniscule structures to resolve needs and concrete problems as needed. Let's just suppose for a moment that this would take place in neighborhood assemblies that regulate living together for neighboring families, who, when necessary, collaborate with other autonomous neighborhoods. Seen from this perspective, Mexico City would not be regarded as a gigantic and inevitable structure but rather as a network of miniscule structures that reconfigure alliances as necessary (for example, to produce or exchange medical supplies in the midst of a pandemic) but that administer communal life in neighborhood-level, autonomous units. We could even go further and imagine the world not as the sum of nation states—these sociopolitical megastructures with centralized powers that have parceled up the world and established borders—but rather as a shifting, collaborative, and adaptable conglomerate of

miniscule social structures. An example is found in my own community, where the operation of the assembly is constituted as a force that impedes the creation of a governing class and allows for any professional or agricultural laborer or preschool teacher or carpenter to participate as members of the communal government for a set amount of time, after which they are replaced by others.

In the face of these oppressive systems, miniscule structures are the ones that have resisted the best and made survival itself possible. Following the establishment of the Spanish colonial order and the destruction of the macrostructures of the great Mesoamerican rulers, in many parts of this territory many of the survivors created relatively autonomous microstructures grounded in a practice of mutual aid, self-government and what the Mixe anthropologist Floriberto Díaz and the Zapoteco anthropologist Jaime Luna have called “communality.” Far from the celebrated moments and historical monuments of the last 500 years, our microstructures have resisted the oppression of macrosystems like colonialism or the creation of the Mexican State. Our microstructures have defended our territories and the resources we hold jointly: the commons. In our miniscule structures, we have made life itself possible despite the centralized powers and governing classes of the macrosystems showering death upon us. Outside of the register of history and practically in silence, we have reproduced our cultures and our peoples, despite it all. I relate this experience with a sentence that appears in the text created by the Indigenous Action Media: *Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto* whose post-script reads: “Our organizing was cellular, it required no formal movements.” Let’s leave behind the formalness of the macro, and let’s organize the world in cellular structures.

Despite the fascination with the macro inculcated in us, we must accept that their operations are simply incompatible with the construction of more equitable societies based on self-governance and mutual aid. The nation state as macrostructure is in crisis and responds badly when it needs to protect our lives in the middle of a pandemic, because by its very definition it cannot personalize care. By contrast, I think about the effects that a miniscule biological structure would have in a world in which macrostructures like capitalism and nation states had not created vulnerable sectors like migrants along deadly borders, people in extreme poverty who are not able to follow sanitary recommendations, people who capitalism has sold industrial foods that have caused diabetes. I think about a world of miniscule structures of solidarity where the food supply and the quality of foods had been administered in a more just and organic way, where taking care of the elderly were more collective, where there were no nations requisitioning medical supplies needed to face the pandemic and denying them to others because they belong to another nation state and then deciding to close their borders to migrants. What would be the level of mortality of the microstructure of the virus in a world in which macrostructures like capitalism did not exist? Faced with the pandemic, the types of care and the problems we are facing could be dealt with communally in miniscule structures grounded in relationships of solidarity and cooperation with other microstructures. These activities fit under the slogan I heard mentioned first by the Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva but which she had heard a long time before then: think globally, act locally. And our locus is the miniscule.

In *The Book of Daniel*, King Nebuchadnezzar—the monarch of a great empire—narrates a worrisome dream: a great statue appears before him made of a variety of materials: a golden head, silver torso, bronze waist, iron legs, and clay feet. A rock falls and hits the statue’s feet; as they are made of a weak material, they cause the entire statue to collapse even though the rest of the statue is made of more solid materials. Nation states are idols with feet made of clay that waver even when a small stone strikes them. This small stone is a structure that dwells in the space between what is alive and what is dead. A stone that is magnified by a pandemic in the echo chamber of capitalism. Resistance will be miniscule. Some people might lament the loss of the idol’s golden head or the magnificent edifices built with slave labor, but we will still have our lives. As Isabel Zapata writes in her books of poems, *A Whale is a Country*: what is miniscule always lasts.

Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil is a linguist from the community of Ayutla Mixe in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte. She is a member of COLMIX, a collective of Mixe young people who engage in research and outreach activities focused on Mixe language, history, and culture.

JD Pluecker works with language: writing, translating, and organizing. In 2010, they co-founded the transdisciplinary collaborative Antena Aire and in 2015 the local social justice interpreting collective Antena Houston. They have translated numerous books from the Spanish, including *Gore Capitalism* (Semiotext(e), 2018) and *Antígona González* (Les Figues Press, 2016). Their book of poetry and image, *Ford Over*, was released in 2016 from Noemi Press. More info at www.johnpluecker.com

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