

Kelly, Ann, Frédéric Keck and Christos Lynteris.
***The Anthropology of Epidemics.* Oxon and New York:**
Routledge, 2019, 182 pages

Oumy Thiongane

Volume 64, Number 2, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109734ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220221535>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Thiongane, O. (2022). Review of [Kelly, Ann, Frédéric Keck and Christos Lynteris. *The Anthropology of Epidemics*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019, 182 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 64(2), 1–5.
<https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220221535>

© Oumy Thiongane, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Book Review

Kelly, Ann, Frédéric Keck and Christos Lynteris.
***The Anthropology of Epidemics*. Oxon and New York:**
Routledge, 2019, 182 pages.

Oumy Thiongane

CIRAD, ASTRE (*Animals Health Territories Risks and Ecosystems*)

Dalhousie University

How can we talk about a book whose subject matter—epidemics—now saturates our imagination and social life? How can we account for a collection of works drawn from epidemics that predate SARS COV 2, yet deals with technoscience issues that are at the heart of global health policies today: the imperative of preparation, the anticipatory and speculation of risk, the viral ontogenesis regime, and the interspecies entanglement that renews the way to think zoonosis? While *The Anthropology of Epidemics* brings together ethnographies on the different ways in which biomedicine responds to contemporary epidemics, the core of the book is to situate the way in which history and anthropology treat epidemics as an object. The epistemological, theoretical, and methodological issues raised by the epidemic as an object are thus at the heart of each chapter.

The social science scholars brought together in this book have been mobilized on emerging diseases that have strongly shaken the Global South: Ebola, Zika, and AIDS, a meta-pandemic that has durably reconfigured the discourse and practice of medical. Two lexical fields dominate the book: zoonosis, a disease of animal origin and transmitted to humans, and infrastructures, a complex assemblage of platforms and both visible and hidden networks and what they allow to circulate. The book's chapters are divided into three main themes: first the ontological turn—a true epistemological renewal—allows for the consideration of animals as actants. The chapters document a reevaluation of our co-evolution with species in social areas marked by their inherently transient nature on the borders of large political areas or in a context of economic transition. The interest of critical social sciences in zoonosis as an object of study is recent and challenging, and the complexity of

interspecies networks (microbes, animals and humans, and plants are missing) raise important sociohistorical, political, and ecological questions. This renewal of the dialectical interaction between humans and animals is magnified by the globalization process and the politicization of public health. The unavoidable quest for the origin of the virus is one of the markers of this politicization. It represents geopolitical stakes that do not succeed in hiding a number of scientific uncertainties, false leads and sometimes dead ends, leading to a reconsideration of the scientific paradigm that underpins it.

Christos Lynteris, a medical anthropologist, writes about a scientific expedition to southern Siberia and Manchuria in search of the origin of the bubonic plague that struck these territories at the end of the nineteenth century. The plague is part of the uncertainties that run through the search for the origin of a virus and the geopolitical (Sino-Russian rivalries) and moral stakes that surround this search. This chapter also represents an important issue for the framing of animal diseases. The tensions between representations, the researchers' hypotheses and uncertainty come up against the complex experience of the field, whose photographic supports are part of an epistemological and methodological approach to renewing visual anthropology. Yet, in the end, it is difficult to bring evidence for the circulation of viruses and the spillover hypothesis.

Nathalie Porter provides a vivid ethnography of a human-animal-virus circularity. She analyzes how family networks and the flow of cash during migration from cosmopolitan cities to rural areas of northern Vietnam disrupt the economy of rural livestock farming by introducing new paths of exposure to risk and emerging diseases. The field chosen is significant: Bac Giant is a Vietnamese hot spot for disease, and Vietnam has seen a considerable increase in its poultry market, where a number of enzootic diseases affecting birds and humans intersect—chickenpox, Marek's disease, Newcastle disease, avian influenza, cambylobacteriosis, etcetera. Intensive breeding increases the risk of antimicrobial resistance. Human and animal vulnerabilities are thus rooted in the absence of a nexus between farming knowledge, kinship solidarity and vigilance, conditions that make possible the success of a neoliberal farming model.

Next, a series of chapters analyzes the world of pandemic preparedness from different perspectives. Frederick Keck and Guillaume Lachenal treat simulations as techniques of health governance rooted in the imaginary and in the scripting of future threats. Using Burkina Faso and Cameroon as case

studies, their chapter analyzes the conditions of possibility of the present based on the future, and the forms of falsification and parody to which simulations are subjected.

Carlo Caduff chooses a serial analysis of anticipation through the functions of media narratives, which at the same time plays on fear and makes sensationalism a business while repeating the same discursive problems. The rhetoric of the coming catastrophe serves the pandemic prophecy whose purpose is to reinforce the preparation of institutions and, beyond that, the American nation dealing with discontinuity.

Andrew Lakoff analyses how different forms of discontinuity framed as emerging infectious diseases or extraordinary events faced tentative regulation inside WHO. The COVID-19 pandemic, as Ebola, failed to make the Public Health Emergency of International Concern the lever of international concerted action while the WHO Emergency committee decision-making drivers remain unclear. This chapter shows that the pandemic is a time of institutional upheaval and a reframing of preparedness. The fact remains that although declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) is a first lever for action, at the end of a pandemic, there are still fundamental questions, missing and remaining puzzle pieces that the emergency does not resolve.

Hannah Brown proposes to focus on standard operating procedures. Brown examines the virtues of these procedures through the desire to detail biosecurity norms, sometimes as close as possible to the experiences of the population, paying particular attention to the conditions of deployment of care (network of relatives) and the resources that relatives bring to the sick. Procedures are also moral processes that interact with the economy; they must consider limited resources and the context of deployment of standard norms. Hannah Brown's chapter foretold the systematic work on the social effects of standards in the development world published two years later by Graham and colleagues (Graham et al., 2021).

Part three offers a series of chapters that directly analyze the social inequalities that embody infrastructures and bodies and are a condition of modes of action and becoming. Genese Sodikoff shows a rare and meticulous ethnography of the plague in Madagascar in 2017, another zoonosis that frequently resurfaces in a country mired in political crises and stark climatic conditions that threaten the agricultural and food capacity of millions of Malagasy. The author underlines the fact that social inequalities

are the breeding ground for emergencies and shows us how agricultural infrastructures set up since the colonial period make the circulation of vectors and parasites possible.

Ruth Prince addresses the reproduction of inequalities through the lens of the moral economy of aid. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kisumu, in western Kenya, a town over-invested by NGOs working on AIDS, shows how the aid bureaucracy forces people living with HIV to redefine themselves according to the norms instituted by aid while protecting themselves from stigmatization.

Vinh Kim Nguyen, an anthropologist, analyzes the transformations of the anthropologist as a profession during an epidemic emergency, while reflecting on the political economy of knowledge that influences what is known and what is not known. He assumes that it is the infrastructures put in place that determine such conditions, from HIV to Ebola. The contribution of phylogenetics to our comprehension of the archives of viruses and the entanglement with human genomes at the structural level remain an edifying example to understand complementarity and similarity between molecular epidemiology and anthropology.

The Anthropology of Epidemics begs the question: Of what is COVID-19 the symptom? The authors gathered here avoid the pitfall of considering that everything has been told about epidemics and its social consequences even if lessons are never learned and global health repeats itself. At this point, the question is what will the future of critical anthropology be regarding epidemics, how the diseases, species, climate change, datafication and digitalization of relationships could be reflected in this specific and repetitive temporality of crisis entanglement, and how the anthropology of epidemics could better address the social consequences of the next epidemic's aftermath? Anthropology is more highly challenged to enlighten the dynamic of diseases post-coloniality, competitive narratives in the wake of digital health surveillance and biosecurity. The absence of researchers from the South in the reflection on the transformations of anthropology through the prism of epidemics and the lack of diversity of the contributors are two of the book's weaknesses. It is regrettable that the reflection on the rise of the One Health paradigm in the book's introduction was not included in one of the chapters, as this would have undoubtedly allowed for a better articulation from an epistemological and temporal point of view of the new framing of health with social sciences' recent interest in zoonosis.

References

- Engelmann, Lukas. 2021. "[Note 1] "Intelligence Is Not a Science"—Notes on the WHO Hub in Berlin." *The Epidemy*, 9 September. <https://www.epidemy.sps.ed.ac.uk/intelligence-is-not-a-science/> (Accessed 30 March 2022).
- Graham, Janice, Christina Holmes, Fiona McDonald, and Regna Darnell (eds). 2021. *The Social Life of Standards: Ethnographic Methods for Local Engagement*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Keita, Alpha Kabinet, Fara R. Koundouno, Martin Faye, Ariane Düx, Julia Hinzmann, Haby Diallo, Ahidjo Ayoub, et al. 2021. "Resurgence of Ebola Virus in 2021 in Guinea Suggests a New Paradigm for Outbreaks." *Nature* 1 (5): 539–543. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03901-9>.
- Lynteris, Christos (ed). 2019. *Framing Animals as Epidemic Villains: Histories of Non-Human Disease Vectors*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.