

CRISIS & CRIT TIQUE

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2020 – THE YEAR OF THE VIRUS. SARS 2 / COVID 19

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**2020 – THE YEAR OF THE
VIRUS. SARS 2 / COVID 19**

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Introduction: 2020 – The Year of the Virus. SARS 2 / COVID 19

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

It is more than trivial to note that 2020 could have turned out to be (come) just another year, just one of those calendrical dates of which the world has seen so many already. Years that in advance may have given rise to expectations only to forget or forcefully oblivate them in their unfolding or to replace them with forms of disappointment that create newer, sometimes lowered, sometimes heightened expectations. 2020 could have become a year to take a rare and merely arbitrary and coincidental constellation of calendrical dates as opportunity for thought: since in 2020 we could all of reflected on what it may mean to celebrate Hegel's and Hölderlin's 250th anniversary in the same year in which we celebrate Engel's 200th and Lenin's 150th. Such a peculiar concatenation of the birthdays and anticipated later birthdates of absolute idealism, dialectical poetry, and two of the most influential and significant forms of (dialectical) materialism in the 20th century, to use highly abstract and poorly informative labels here for the purpose of brevity, could itself have presented a chance for speculative genealogies, reconsidered filiations and self-correcting self-critiques that may have led into burning questions of dialectical thinking that are still pressing today. But (very) little of (and almost no time for) this in 2020.

2020 also could have turned into a year in which, speaking in broad, and potentially even only vaguely political terms, we could have followed, endorsed, been enthusiasm, disgusted, or disappointed by the processes happening on a representational and state level, especially – depending on one's leaning or interpretation of them – if one were to consider them significant enough to determine the future of a country, of a continent or the entire planet. The elections held in the USA, in Bolivia, Kosovo, Poland, and New Zealand, to name but a few, may each belong in one or more of the above-mentioned categories. All these would have happened alongside, against the background of, in support of, or in stark contrast to the referendum in Chile, the yellow vests, Hong Kong protests, Brexit, LGBTQ+ movement(s), persistent climate change activism and rebellion, anticipated and devastating conflagrations, disastrous storms, some of which may have led to novel and media-orchestrated pseudo-decisions to plan changing things at some point in the not too distant future.

Yet, 2020 turned out quite differently; it turned into a year in which a virus became the real protagonist (or antagonist) and that immediately on a number of different levels. Economically, the virus did produce some astounding effects – it precipitated “the largest economic shock of our lifetimes”, as Goldman Sachs commented.¹ For the first time in at least a hundred years – recall that in April 1920 the previous and terrifyingly deadly Avian flu ended² – there was a state-imposed

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¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/30/coronavirus-goldman-says-pandemic-will-permanently-alter-oil-markets.html>

² Davis 2020a.

and state-defended halt brought to the national and international market dynamic and therewith to economic growth in many countries. For months we witnessed a suspension of previously untouchable economic credos and a pandemic forcing measures upon all kinds of governments that some wished should have been forced upon them by emancipatory movements long ago. This was not only a demonstration that actions were possible that previously were repeatedly deemed not possible, even though this is an undeniable fact. But the virus thereby also and contingently produced what previously was supposed to be the conscious action of an emancipatory organization or agent, notably an increasing condensation of the existing contradictions – which was therefore previously referred to as politicization. But can viruses politicize in this sense of the term? Did the virus operate like an unwilling Leninist party? Certainly not. Yet, it produced a crisis, a crisis of a new and different type, and this very crisis produced a series of unanticipated insights.

One was that states can operate not only as protectors and guardians of capital, but also for other purposes, including that they can actually stop or determine capital fluctuations and become the guardians and protectors of the people – even though there are many debates to be had on that front. States appeared to effectively protect their populations when they did not simply liberate themselves from economic prerogatives, but when they served as (un)willing instruments of scientifically produced knowledge (or they did not, when they decide not to). Another insight was that it seems necessary to have a debate around, ultimately, can counted and in the situation of crisis was counted as “essential work” and what should, can or did not.³ Even though this discussion mostly remained latent and implicit, this might have been something that could have been politicized: what can count as relevant work for and within a society, what kind of work does a society deem useless or what kind does it regard as a luxury that it nonetheless would never want to give up on.⁴ Even though, the acclamation-rituals, i.e. people applauding the workers deemed essential were quite present at first they subsequently disappeared, even though promises were made that, if we are once living under ameliorated conditions these conditions would also certainly imply an improvement of the working conditions of the “essential workers” (many of them working in lesser or even low paid jobs thus far), this was forgotten almost immediately when things calmed down a little and then (i.e., now) things got worse again (at least in Europe).

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3 Hallward 2020

4 In this sense, Hegel for example referred to philosophy as being luxury – and otherwise being a harsh critique of luxury and the more trivial and material sense of the term (as sign of depravity and decadence).

At the beginning of his recent book *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, Andreas Malm addresses another insight by raising the question as to “why... the states of the global North act on corona but not on climate?... The question was discussed on the online forums to which humanity was condemned in March.”⁵ Why did “states in advanced capitalist countries got so relatively fired up about the virus”?⁶ The list of ultimately unconvincing reasons Malm discusses is long. To name but a few: some argued that only Covid presents a real problem, not climate change (which is obviously wrong), others that Covid presents a more serious danger than climate change, a thesis hardly tenable, especially when taking into account the moment at which governments started rushing to act; at that precise point in time they did not have any appropriate scientific knowledge on their side and “virtually every aspect of the disease”⁷ was still uncertain, whereas the science on climate change is solid and long established. Some argued that climate change is not visible, but it is hard not to see that viruses are no less apparent; some argued that climate change is gradual and Corona appeared as a sudden explosion, but a storm or a locust attack does not appear less explosive or sudden. Is it the mortality rates then? This is also not a very convincing explanation, simply because the climate crisis mortality rates will be far higher than the ones expected because of the virus (and no one knew how high the rates will turn out to be when the state actions began). So what was it that made the states act so swiftly? When these deaths appeared in the center of the advanced Western world, something changed. When those who otherwise do not have much to fear could more or less justifiably get anxious and no one knew if even the most advanced existing health care systems, those of and in rich countries will be sufficiently equipped to care for their respective populations, something changed in the general Western risk assessment. One is justified to act if one might become a direct victim otherwise.

This is to say, this time it did not happen elsewhere, not in some place that one could calmly identify from the distance as a hotspot of something terrible going on. The virus became (for the West) a truly global virus, when the threat was a threat to the West, when it did not threaten only threaten the poor displayed almost a negative egalitarian disregard for particularities – even though it thrives less on the young. Obviously, and more obviously than for a long time, it helps if you are rich and it super-helps if you are super-rich – and it, without any doubt, immediately did not simply stop capitalism as such. Zoom’s, Skype’s, and similar

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5 Malm 2020, p. 12.

6 Ibid., p.18

7 Ibid. p.13

communication software's market value skyrocketed, as did that of HelloFresh and especially Amazon, for that matter. The virus did therefore not suspend the incentives to discover new field for value production or extraction. It did also not make everything better and greener by stopping some things that were otherwise omnipresent for a little while – it was clear that it could not take long until someone instrumentalized the pandemic for a political coup or for an increasing of value extraction.

But the point we want to make here is that the pandemic became a real problem when it seemed as if not even wealth could provide anyone with an absolute guarantee of survival and when the virus did not concern some particularities alone (like with the HIV/AIDS pandemic that led to all kinds of pathologizations of its victims, such as stigmatizations of gender choices, sexual orientations or entire “lifestyles”), but was a universal, one-world threat. Maybe the first vision of the world that has emerged since the meagre one of so called “globalisation”. But does this mean this is a virus that attacks mankind and that therefore can only be combated by mankind working together? The still ongoing race to get a vaccine up to scale and widely available (even though, now there is a potential winner) might symptomatically bring out in what direction we are heading, since the prospect of privatizing something everyone needs is certainly one of the more horrifying aspects of the current situation. Therefore it seems imperative to learn what Mike Davis called the right lessons from this global pandemic that could point to a way if not out, but to one that might lead to a slight amelioration of the situation or might at least not be simply identical to a parachute-free skydive into the abyss.⁸ Not only is it more than ever relevant to defend science and scientificity, and not only must in situations like these – and in this sense, the current pandemic could serve as a significant precedent – state policing and government be oriented, informed and instructed by science and scientific research. Furthermore, the very nature of science must be – and this could amongst other things become a highly difficult, yet relevant task of the state(s) – protected, and this means it must be defended as something that takes place in distance from economic demands and needs, especially from the current global financial system. The right lesson to learn is not that states can only help their peoples when they limit democracy, but rather when they protect what is crucial for the survival of them, from universal health care, maybe even more than just basic, to adequate scientific research that must be shared universally and of which all privatization-attempts must not only be universally prohibited, but also scorned (at least). The tasks of the state could become that of a septum separating not only science (and medicine) from economy, but also politics from economy. All this will certainly become relevant for the imminent ecological disaster we are facing, too.

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8 Cf. Davis 2020b

Now, there is, especially for (Western) philosophers, a very specific viral threat in all this, a viral threat of the pandemic. Notably, to finally have come across the one phenomenon that seems to have significance for the entire world and that validates one's own theoretical perspective. We have seen an abundance of interpretations emerging with the pandemic and it may have appeared that the second seconded the first, ultimately proving that sometimes the business of philosophy appears to become manifest in interpreting the world differently and actually simply waiting for another occasion to do so. At times there seemed to be a certain dose of conceptual narcissism involved, following the logic that “if I do not have anything meaningful to say about this virus, my philosophical position might be not really worthwhile.” Others countered this, by emphasizing that a virus has in itself no meaning whatsoever and therefore it is rather indicative of a (narcissistic-hermeneutico) professional deformation to even embark on a search trip for it. The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* brings together an array of thinkers who all in their singular way deal with the effects of the virus, with how the pandemic was registered, with its resonances, with what kind of problems it potentially made visible or what kind of issues it brought to the fore, including the narcissistic tendency of “theory”, broadly speaking itself. Thereby, this issue did not invite people to simply interpret the inexistent deeper meaning of SARS-2, which in its viral-substance as its name indicates does not vary all too greatly from that of SARS-1 or MEARS, but to discuss what follows from it (even if the answer might be: nothing).⁹ In this sense, what you are about to read is an exercise in science-fiction, as we are trying to imagine in 2020 how 2020 will be remembered. But maybe this whole issue will one day be forgotten.

Berlin/Prishtina, November 2020

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9We also want to thank Ethan Foore for his support in preparing the present collection of articles.

Living, Learning, Imagining in the Middle of the Crisis¹

Étienne Balibar

Abstract: The present work deals with the effects of the COVID 19 in relation to a specific feature of our current experience, with its contingent singular dimension. It is roughly divided into three parts. The first will regard the political emerging through the crisis, as it is revealed—quite unexpectedly—by the global resonance of the “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations in the U.S. The second part will regard the renewed importance of the “Public Services.” The third one will regard the incipient economic crisis, and the correlated debate about the future of the so-called “neoliberal” form of capitalism. At the end, I outline three issues for reflection, in the spirit of post-Marxism.

Keywords: crisis, Black Lives Matters, State, the Commons, neoliberalism

It is quite disturbing for us all, and it is frustrating, that we can't be together in the same place, in a good old auditorium, listening and talking to each other. My hope is that this situation, which is just the normalization of the abnormal, doesn't become “the new normal”. On the other hand, quite obviously, if our summer school had been taking place in its original format, I would have chosen a different topic for my classes, and I would have missed something, namely the opportunity to think, or, as I propose in my title: to live, to learn, and to imagine in the middle of the great crisis—perhaps the first of the coming crises of our century. This is something which, like many of us, I thought was absolutely necessary. And I could think of no better place and circumstance to make this attempt than this summer school, where I have been coming for many years now. Nothing that I will say is more than experimental. It simply represents my state of thought at this date. I am writing on June 27, and we will be discussing the lecture on July 3rd, in just a few days. I expect many questions, objections, and critiques.

I speak of crisis. This is the obvious name for what we are experiencing in this moment. But what does it mean? And does it, could it mean *the same* for everybody, regardless of our profession, age, gender or race, our country, and in fact our place in the world? Does it mean the same as in previous uses of this category—and there have been so many of them since it was coined in its original language by medical and political thinkers of ancient Greece? Nothing is less sure; although it is interesting to note that—exceptionally—the two sides of this traditional meaning (the medical and the political) are now intimately linked to one another within a single event. One of the aims of this lecture is to begin

¹The Lecture was delivered online on July 3rd, 2020. I am very grateful to the Directors of the School, Profs. Esther Leslie and Jacqueline Rose, for inviting me and authorizing this publication. An expanded version was published in French on the Journal *Analyse Opinion Critique*, July 15, 16 and 17, 2020 (<https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/07/16/fin-du-capitalisme-neoliberal-mi-temps-de-la-crise-3-3/>).

discussing afresh what it is that we call a “crisis”, from the vantage point of its *unfinished experience*. But I don’t want to address this question immediately, i.e., abstractly. On the contrary, I want to reach it through a detour, in fact several detours, which reveal its determinations.

I want to address three main points, each combining a general question and a specific aspect of our current experience, with its contingent singular dimensions. The first will regard the becoming of the political in the crisis, as it is revealed—quite unexpectedly—by the global resonance of the “Black Lives Matter” demonstrations in the U.S. The second will regard the renewed importance of the “Public Services” (particularly of course the National Health Services), as it is revealed by the sanitary crisis, a revival which seems to involve a strong opposition of principles and norms between the idea of the State and the idea of the Commons. The third will regard the incipient economic crisis—as a crisis which is all the more violent because it is not, precisely, purely economic—and the correlated debate about the future of the so-called “neoliberal” form of capitalism, which in circles of critical thought give rise to completely antithetic prognoses. Of course each of these questions *per se* deserves a complex discussion for which I have neither the time, nor perhaps the required expertise. I will have to limit myself to suggesting frames of interpretation, including a few sketchy analyses. Nevertheless, even with no time to waste, I must begin with a preliminary reflection on the position in which I find myself and I am trying to embark you with me.

As I already said recently on some occasions, it seems to me that one of the most important elements that we must bear in mind is the absolute *uncertainty* characterizing the situation in which we are now, with no predictable end. This comes from the fact that—provided we see things from a global point of view, which is intrinsic to the pandemic as such—the development of the infection is not halted, it has not even reached its peak, but it remains dormant or becomes reactivated where it had been controlled (at a considerable price), and rapidly expanding elsewhere (which is the greatest part of the world). Remedies or vaccines are not in view immediately (although they elicit theatrical announcements and nasty rivalries). Internal and external borders are fragile obstacles with ambiguous effects. The uncertainty also comes from the fact that the economic crisis (which everybody agrees is inevitable or already hitting hard some parts of the world and some social groups) has only very partially revealed its characteristics. In Europe in particular (of which Britain remains a part as of today, and from which it will never be fully separated) it is being postponed through “exceptional” monetary and credit policies (to which I will return in my third part), but the conflict is already open about how to “sustain” and “compensate” for these policies, and the massive consequences of bankruptcies and interruptions in the commercial operations and the chains of production

are still to come. This also means that, for millions of people, life will become increasingly hazardous; a phenomenon whose moral and political effects cannot be measured in advance. For these reasons, I find myself extremely suspicious of what I would call “anticipated resolutions of the crisis”—an intellectual exercise actively fostered these days.

Second—which is but the other side of the same coin, expressed in more speculative terms—I am convinced that any interpretation of our critical situation *in tempore reali* must not erase the contradictory determinations which can be observed simultaneously. This comes from the fact that, observing the crisis while we are also affected by it, learning from it while we look for analytical elements in our intellectual repertory, we find ourselves continuously torn between *opposite positions*. For example we realize that a very ancient, often forgotten past is being reactivated, that of large epidemics forcing whole societies to hold on their activities and to confine their members, leading historians to compare our reactions with those of the contemporaries of the Black Pest or the “Spanish” Flu. At the same time, in the context of ecological disasters which are already affecting our present, and above all after the revelation that the pandemic originates in the diffusion of certain viruses across the “species barrier”, which is facilitated by the devastations of remaining wilderness, we suspect that we are already living in a world where the consequences of agricultural and industrial productivism will affect our daily life and make it very difficult. Such considerations, however, are inevitably biased when they draw their inspiration from purely European perceptions of the situation, which is a paradox in the case of a pandemic affecting the whole world. We would not have the same perception of the paradoxical combination of archaism and futurism if we took an African point-of-view, since murderous “zoonoses” have repeatedly occurred there in the last decades, but also, apparently, a greater collective skill at protecting the population has developed, despite poorer medical resources. The crisis certainly does not abolish local and cultural differences, but it is brutally combining a global dimension and a complex pattern of local effects. Nationalist and xenophobic reactions compete with intense feelings of *neighborhood*, in every sense of the term. Finally (and I hope to be able to return to this question in my conclusion), the crisis is deeply affecting the psychology of subjects, who experience affectively their vulnerability, their solidarity, their antagonisms; but it is also forces them to *objectivize their condition*, to perceive of themselves as natural beings living on the same planet, participating in the same economy made of impersonal forces, and above all belonging to the same *human species*: a notion which decidedly ceases only to indicate *sameness of the genetic characters*, but now points at the existence of a *single population*, although the “politics” and the “ethics” of that population, or the way it must either “govern” itself or become *governed* in its own interest, is far from easily defined.

It is with all these provisos in mind that I want now to come to the three critical points I had announced.

The importance of “Black Live Matters” and its relationship to the crisis.

Right away, let me suggest that the ongoing revolt against police brutality and criminality targeting the African-American population in the U.S., prompted by the killing of George Floyd and other similar cases before and after him, under the aegis of the movement “Black Lives Matter”, is not only one of the most significant emancipatory movements in the last weeks, but also one which affects our understanding of the sanitary crisis *in real time*, and is likely deeply modifying its political consequences. I call this movement an *insurrection* in the broad sense of the term, meaning a massive uprising of ordinary citizens who reject an established oppressive social order and call for a radical change in the “material” and the “moral” constitution of the society, so that the subjection of some its members to others is no longer accepted and incorporated into the practices of its governmentality (to borrow a Foucauldian category). This insurrection may be suppressed, or fail to reach its objective (which themselves become enriched and clarified as the movement goes on): this will depend *inter alia* of the conditions created by the development of the crisis itself, which it is much too early to anticipate, but it is clearly so powerful that it has forced a reversal of ingrained state policies, and will inevitably produce civilizational irreversible transformations. The participants are “insurgents” in the historical and civic sense of the term.

Several aspects are worth emphasizing immediately. First, despite some violent episodes (where *of course* I don’t count looting or destruction of properties, as if these should be equated with assaults on *persons*), this is an essentially *non-violent* movement. Or better said it is a *civility* movement, in the sense that I tried to define some years ago, because it aims at neutralizing the systemic violence incarnated in the murderous daily practices of police forces against Black people, and more generally people of color. If following the analyses of Bernard Harcourt on “the American Counterrevolution”, then we observe that militarization has become an organic dimension of the police apparatus. In response, calls for the “dismantling” of the racist police forces is at the heart of the movement, with the broader meaning of targeting the structures of extreme violence that uphold inequalities in the whole social fabric. I submit that this kind of *anti-violent* politics is one of the clearest forms of revolutionary politics in today’s world, where structural violence is overwhelming. But there are other revolutionary aspects in the movement. It could be called a “cultural revolution” from below, echoing certain striking features of the movements that developed all around the world in the late 1960’s (allegorically called “68”), since it generates a deep (and, understandably, highly conflictual) reexamination of the historical

foundations of our post-slavery and post-colonial societies, challenging their official narratives, their educational symbols, and their established “silent” hierarchies (on a par with recent feminist movements). This leads to also emphasizing another two striking characteristics, intimately connected: one, the “popular” dimension of an insurrection that, specifically directed against racial oppression (and mainly conducted by members of the oppressed minority), nevertheless involves and unites individuals of all races, Whites and non-Whites, with many different social backgrounds, especially from the young generations; second the amazing fact (another similarity with the 68 conjuncture) that the insurrection proves “contagious” internationally, raising enthusiasm and generating echoes in other parts of the world where similar historical conditions exist (of course this is not universal, and I may be influenced by the fact that France, in a highly conflictual manner as well, is one of the examples, but I remain convinced that the “global” dimension exists).

Now you may ask: all this is undeniable, but why consider it a central determination for our understanding of the crisis which is prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic? Some auditors might say that this is a pure coincidence, because the racial conflict in the US and elsewhere has other independent causes, tracing back long before this pandemic; or they might say that the pandemic was a mere *opportunity* for the protests against police violence to acquire a special moral and political resonance... I think that we can establish a much more organic articulation, by invoking two correlative determinations:

First, we can say that what is revealed in this contemporaneity of the crisis and the insurrection is the deep *anthropological structure* of the crisis itself. It has been immediately observed (and repeated by several analysts) that the sanitary crisis doesn’t affect every social group in the same manner; it underlines and intensifies all sorts of inequalities, whether economic, urban, professional, or based on race and gender (which most of the time are not independent, but “intersect” in a systemic manner), for example because the virus is more aggressive and more lethal for individuals with co-morbidities (which are socially determined), or living in conditions of poverty, or performing functions of care and domestic service for others. And it has been observed that the prophylactic measures imposed to “control” and “suppress” the pandemic, however necessary they are, do not protect and target different social groups equally. On the contrary, they add new forms of discrimination to the already existing “structural” ones. I don’t think that this a purely “sociological” phenomenon, I’d rather say that is transforming, under our very eyes, different types and degrees of social inequality into a condition of “precarious life” (Judith Butler) which *divides the human condition* in its relationship towards illness, survival, and death – which is what I called elsewhere an *anthropological difference*. But what is also clear is that racial divides in our societies (or quasi-racial

divides: think of the Hindu-Muslim difference in India) are already “anthropological differences” in that sense. So the sanitary, economic, and anthropological dimensions of the crisis are “mediating” each other, as philosophers would say, to create a single reproducing process.

Second, we may observe a crucial *political* consequence of this process. The consequences of the sanitary crisis are diverse, not reaching the same degree depending on places: at one extreme, the “populist” or “illiberal” regimes in Europe, Latin America, the “theocracies” in the Middle East, the increasingly autocratic regime of Trump in the U.S.; at the other end the diverse cases of “disciplined” societies in East Asia, but also Germany. However, everywhere – with the possible exception of China, which remains enigmatic since its data is not completely known - it has revealed a failed governmentality in matters of public health and other social services (to which I return in my second part). This is largely perceived (and rightly so) as created or aggravated by the triumph over the last decades (precisely since the “68” moment) of the “neo-liberal” type of capitalism, with its aim of developing individualist and hypercompetitive “human capital”, and its correlated plan to dismantle systems of social security and social care where they existed, or prevent them from being created where they did not exist (remember Margaret Thatcher’s mantra, “There is no such thing as society.”). This creates in the critical conjuncture of the pandemic a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of possibility for “federations” of protest movements against the system (what Ernesto Laclau famously called “chains of equivalences”), which paradoxically recreate the need and the capacity for open political movements (or “re-politicization” of the society) in a society which had been deemed “post-democratic” or “depoliticized”. The current movement (which I called insurrectional) is one testimony of the fact that this possibility can materialize. And of course it is highly significant that it combines the anthropological dimensions linked to life and death uncertainties with social protests against a devalued existence and a quest for a different kind of governance and authority—which leads me to my second point.

Public services between the two logics: the State vs the Common.

I come now to what I am convinced is a strategic issue in our experience of the crisis, with far reaching consequences on our equipment for understanding the kind of conflicts and alternatives that will frame “the political” in the new sequence initiated by the crisis. I see it as a long *transition period*, whose starting point we are witnessing today, and whose future developments remain unknown. This is precisely why I find it so important to identify symptomatic points of “adversity” and “heresy” in the conjuncture, as they become revealed by the unfolding of the pandemic and its social consequences.

One such symptom is constituted by what I am tempted to call *the crisis within the crisis*, namely the fact that *public services* (first of all the health services, but also others) more than ever appear as essential conditions of possibility of our lives, individually and collectively, but at the same time as unstable, even contradictory institutions, whose working is torn between antithetic logics. These are *political* logics, in the broad sense of the term: the logic of State intervention, State funding and administration, State protection and therefore also disciplinary control of individuals by the State, and the logic of social solidarity, made of “horizontal” or “reciprocal” cooperation, for which I borrow the category that has been recently retrieved by neo-communist thinkers (such as, prominently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri): the Common (or the Commonwealth). I want to summarily explain why I believe that this tension is not easily resolved, but also potentially pregnant with historical novelty.

A country like Britain (and—with some differences—this also holds for France) is proud of being home of a “National Health Service” that was designed after WWII, assembling and revamping preexisting institutions created by private actors and philanthropic associations. It includes universal coverage of medical expenses and hospital facilities, plus crucial research programs in biology and medicine. The general feeling today is that, although the capacity of the institution to actually “serve” the public in times of emergency had been severely damaged by neo-liberal policies of privatization, underfunding and the submission of medical programs to the principle of instant “profitability” (which, especially in the French case that I know better, have led to catastrophic shortages of beds, inhalators, virological tests, and face masks), the capacities of the public health service to stand the “shock” of the pandemic and assist the population has proved invaluable (not without dramatic exceptions, notably—again in the French case—for what concerns the care and protection of the elderly, which had been already largely privatized). However it is not clear whether this is due to the fact that the public service was a *State administration*, relatively isolated from the forces of the private market and foreign to the logic of competition, or to the fact that it draws its resilience and creativity from a synergy between its own *autonomous initiatives* and a trust and strong moral solidarity of the citizens around it. To discuss this point, let us introduce some prerequisites.

We must bear in mind that vital Public Services are many, and very heterogeneous, owing to their specific functions and their singular histories (from one country to another and within each country). Some are decentralized (e.g. belonging to municipal administration), others are highly centralized, at least formally (such as the school system in France). They are in fact “serving” the public in different, almost antithetic senses of the term: providing support, or imposing norms and disciplinary

constraints, with a complementarity of these roles (typically illustrated in this crisis by the association of prophylactic rules and medical treatment). At one end, we have the police, at the other end, we have the educational system (both strained and challenged during the crisis). What makes the service of public health exemplary, if not unique, is the fact that it is not, in reality, composed of a single hierarchic administration. To perform its social task, rather, it must consist of a *network* of activities and functions, which are coextensive with the whole society. They are performed by a huge variety of professionals and agents, with very unequal prestige and salaries: from doctors to academics and researchers, from nurses to cleaning personnel, from ambulance drivers to home assistants, etc. And, as we know, the people who perform these tasks, relying on each other's capacity in the right place at the right moment, form a kind of "miniature image" of the society as a whole, in its professional, racial, gender composition, etc. A highly significant phenomenon at the peak of the crisis in France has been the sudden visibility of the women and the mass of underpaid precarious workers (including a great number of migrants, sometimes even undocumented) without whom the service would not work. They too emerged as essential parts of the public service. Another important aspect was the fact that the intense conflicts within the public service, in part resulting from a long history of internal class relations, overdetermined by gender and race, in part aggravated by the neo-liberal policies of "de-publicization", have been "mediated", or rather "suspended", in order for the medical emergency to come first. But at the same time a broad public or constituency of citizens, including patients and their relatives, could observe the devastating effects of the "crisis within the crisis", and more or less explicitly rallied around the demand of a better and different health service and social security system, particularly a more *egalitarian* one.

What has become visible, almost undeniable for many citizens, was on the one hand the fact that – at least in our advanced "post-industrial" societies, which experienced two successive "revolutions" in the last century, one instituting the welfare state in a national (and also most of the time imperial) framework (what I call the "national-social state") instead of the purely capitalist management of the labour-force, one "reversing" the social policies into an "adaptation" to the pure logic of market profitability—public services such as national health cannot dispense of state interventions, support and planning, ranging from public funding to the systematic construction of facilities which more or less effectively compensate for differences of incomes and unequal access to treatments. They also develop research capacities which are not immediately profitable but will prove necessary in some unpredictable future. This, in turn, requires relying on progressive taxation, long term public investment, guaranteed salaries in the public services, state control of the standards of care and cleanliness, etc. This runs directly

against the ideology and the practices of neoliberal policies (as they have been dominant in Europe and other parts of the world for two or three generations now), which as it were *turn the political power of the state against the social function of the state* and destroy the public from inside. But it also runs against the "pure" ideology (or utopia) of the commons, which often seems to believe that public services can become entirely subsumed under the scheme of "care", or the multitude taking care of itself, under the guidance of its own "general intellect", just displaying its unmediated capacity to think and organize cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid through democratic assemblies at every level, from the local to the national, perhaps even the global. On the other hand, however, what became visible was the fact that a society which confronts extreme perils (today a pandemic, tomorrow another one, or another type of environmental disaster) in a relatively egalitarian manner, i.e., without breaking into heterogeneous parts leading to violent conflicts, cannot purely rely on the state, or delegate its governing capacity to the absolute rule of the State and its own rulers. We are reminded here of the famous sentence issued by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, when discussing the issue of public education: "Who is going to educate the educators?". This becomes now: who is going to coerce the state into serving well its own public services, or elaborate the forms of their democratic control, associating professionals and beneficiaries, i.e., ordinary citizens? The answer in both cases is the same: it can be only a thinking and organized "multitude", which fuses the idea of the public with a practical elaboration of the *common interest*, being also the interest of the mass of *common people*. Is this not in fact the actual content of all the actions of solidarity and the collective agency that emerged during the crisis, ranging from joint initiatives of nurses and doctors in the hospitals in order to compensate for the contradictory injunctions of the government, to the setting up of food and medical subsidies by activists in the popular suburbs? These are all testimonies of a *community effect*, even I would say moments of practical "communism" emerging out of the crisis itself.

As a consequence, the "state" at the same time appears as a recourse, an agent of protection, and an object of critique and replacement, which is challenged by "counter-conducts" and "counter-powers", in a fragile and problematic equilibrium. But perhaps we are not, in fact, talking of the same "state"? Or perhaps the state itself, in the process of the crisis, becomes *divided* between antithetic logics? It seems to me that a theoretical solution for this riddle, provisionally at least, could reside in deciding that it is rather the "public service" that harbors a unity of opposites, a dialectics of conflict and cooperation between the two logics which are also two "concepts of the political", the logic of statist *authority* (rather than "sovereignty"), and the logic of horizontal *commonality*. The comprehensive notion of the "public"

ranging from public governance and property to the responsibility of institutions before the public as enlightened multitude appears at the same time as a site of encounter between these two logics, and a stake at play in their competition. This is of course not an entirely new pattern of social and political agency, especially in periods of historic crises. But in the current situation it remains to be seen which intensity it will acquire and where it will lead our societies. This will largely depend on how the crisis affects the evolution of the current form of capitalism.

Towards a termination of the “neoliberal” phase of capitalism?

This will be my final point. And I must warn: even more than before, I have to simplify and erase many difficulties and issues of open debate. However it is not possible not to address the question that was underlying since the beginning, namely in which sense the crisis we are experiencing is a “crisis”? In other terms, we need to ask *what is in crisis*, and *which antithesis* we choose for the idea of crisis among the classical possibilities (resolution, revolution, regulation, etc.). At the beginning I suggested that our understanding of the notion, which has been constructed over an analogy between the medical and the political field, now remarkably *collapses* the two registers. This is what gives credit to the notions of “biopolitics” and the “biopolitical”, systematized by Foucault one generation ago. But we are also told repeatedly that, because the sanitary crisis unleashed by the pandemic has also produced an almost unprecedented simultaneous collapsing of supply and demand, an economic crisis of gigantic magnitude, with geopolitical implications, is growing. It would call for radical “solutions” themselves unprecedented. There is broad agreement that the patterns of globalization as they have been erected in the last 30 years have had unacceptable negative consequences on the capacity of nation-states to fight the pandemic, e.g. because they concentrated the supply of pharmaceutical products in East and South East Asia, particularly China. And there is broad agreement that the implementation of the “capitalist” strategy to protect the capitalist economy from collapsing as it did in the 1930s (or even more brutally), namely the massive “quantitative easing” of liquidities, already has put into question the financial “orthodoxy” of neoliberalism, and will increasingly do so, by “rehabilitating” the economic agency of the state and the positive consequences of public debt. To which it is also frequently added that the impossibility to ignore any longer the rising of an ecological disaster will push in the same direction (although nobody agrees on which “revolutions” a green economy should impose). But—if for the sake of simplification we concentrate our attention on what interests us most, namely “critical” thought—there are absolutely antithetic views about whether or not this involves an existential threat for the so-called “neoliberal regime”,

broadly seen as incarnating a new “stage” of capitalism. In fact some critics explain that the crisis has made financial austerity and the restriction of social security systems economically and politically impossible, therefore “neoliberalism” is doomed, whereas others explain that—wanting a “socialist” or “communist” revolution whose political conditions may or may not emerge during the crisis—neoliberalism cannot be challenged as the “dominant” system, therefore the crisis will rather lead to its completion and intensification. To sum up, the debate has two correlated aspects: one which concerns the articulation of economic and non-economic aspects of the crisis, one which concerns its impact on the “stability” of the neoliberal regime.

I have no prefabricated solution for these debates, but—adopting a “post-Marxist” point of view, which includes at the same time a continuation of the critique of political economy and a potential revision of the Marxist definition of capitalism—I will submit three sensitive issues for further reflection:

First, there is the question of the consequences of the growth of public debt (or private debt that is warranted by either the State or supranational institutions, or transformed into long term public debt). It is well-known that neo-liberal capitalism involves a huge extension of credit, what Marx called “fictitious capital”, a total dependency on debt of both corporations and individual consumers, and a lifting of rules restricting the limitless creation of aleatory financial products... It is also widely supposed that neoliberalism is intrinsically a ferocious system of imposition of the burden of debts on the multitude of the poor (and the indebted countries of the Global South) though austerity policies. What is not predictable however are the consequences of a *lasting impossibility* to carry further the same type of austerity, both because it becomes politically explosive and because it presupposes a situation of relative “solvency” even for the poor, which means in particular that they are employed or have some other resources. What we hear now is that there is an alternative, already rampant in the policies of central banks: the “monetization of debt”. This is likely to become the cornerstone of economic regulation. But the continuous monetization of debt involves a change in the *definition of money* since it reverses the law of reproduction of the “general equivalent”. And this reproduction itself is a key structure on which the unity of the “social formation” relies. What comes *after* the law is reversed? Unchartered territory for capitalism...

Second, there is the question of the consequences of increasing poverty, the fall of masses of individuals and families, territories, neighborhoods, whole generational and professional groups below the line of extreme inequality, into the category of social *exclusion* and the reliance on philanthropy. In other terms, it is a question of qualitative change in the regime of *precariousness* for the society as a whole. Again, we know that increasing precariousness is a defining aspect of

neoliberalism: in particular we have realized that neoliberal capitalism multiplies precarious statuses of temporary employment and “self-entrepreneurship”, while also cynically exploiting migrant labour and “family values” (Melinda Cooper) in order to weaken the institutional resistance of wage-labour against higher levels of exploitation. What we don’t know is how a capitalist society (and a capitalist state) with its internal antagonisms reacts to the *normalization of the exception*, or the simultaneous development of precariousness and an interruption of the business cycle. Just as the changing status of the general equivalent was a destabilization from above, this is a destabilization from below. And, abstractly speaking, there are only two solutions, none of which is easy to imagine: either capitalism becomes “hyper-liberal”, recreating conditions of mass poverty whose victims are violently controlled by police operations (and probably also fostering xenophobia and racism, in clear becoming organically fascist, to neutralize or divert uprisings); or it allows for a new development in the history of “social security”, which goes beyond more or less effective safety nets for the excluded population, e.g. by establishing some variety of the “universal basic income” based on *citizenship*. But this is a revolution. In fact both solutions are “revolutionary”, albeit in opposite senses.

Let us note in passing (leaving it aside for further inquiry), that both destabilizations, from above and from below, transforming the articulation of money and credit, and the precarious articulation of labor and social security, involve a change in the “measurement” of *value*, whether defined in classical and Marxist “objective” terms, or in neo-classical and monetarist “subjective” terms. This will be the case even more with my last point:

Finally, what has to be discussed is the modality in which the “sanitary” crisis, the “economic” crisis, and the “moral” (or ethical) crisis are interfering. They develop at different rhythms, and they don’t affect the same people, the same places to the same degree. But they are so intricate that they force us to rethink what we call a crisis. Because of the striking extension of the pandemic and its brutal effects on the “regular”, “normal” course of life (which includes paradoxes, since it links a general lockdown to casualties that are relatively moderate, when compared to certain past epidemics), the path of intelligibility usually adopted follows the “logical” order of a biological *cause* and socio-economic or psychological *effects*. Given the dominant “economicist” representation of our social systems, I believe that it is more interesting to describe the critical conjuncture in terms of a *departure from the usual picture of a crisis* as an interruption between regimes of normality (called regulations, or dynamic equilibria by mainstream economists, phases of enlarged reproduction by Marxists): it would result from the “invasion” of the social processes by the biological pathologies which, like mega-viruses themselves, are now producing a chain of destructions

and disturbances *from within* the social system. The usual name for contingent shocks not anticipated or accounted for in macro-economic models is *externality*. And the question of neglected externalities has been increasingly insistent since the ecological crisis has accelerated and grown in magnitude, and it has become clear that the destruction of environmental conditions which, albeit “external” to the processes formalized by economic theory and the theory of social relations, form their necessary prerequisite, are not even named or counted in the dominant discourse. As a consequence, the *internalization of externalities* can be considered the guiding thread of the intellectual reform needed to analyze contemporary crises of the capitalist world and seek social strategies inspired by new values. But the pandemic is a very strange kind of “externality” in fact, one which (although its origins lie in our relationship to the environment) is developing and affects us *from inside*, the inside of our organisms and the lively intercourse giving rise to “contagion”. An *internal externality* as it were. For that reason, the picture of the “shock” is largely inadequate, it ought to be replaced with an idea of an “auto-immunity” of our social and political system due to its more or less deliberate ignorance of its own life conditions.² Again, the category of “value” as it is used by the dominant economic discourse (including its “heretic” variety, the Marxist critique) must be rectified here, because it does not include *negative values* as well as *positive* (accumulated) values, not only in times of crisis, but in “normal” times.

But what are the normal times? We realize that, in its traditional definitions, a *crisis* was always defined in terms of the kind of *affirmation* that it is meant to suspend, or destroy, or “negate”, within a pattern of mutually exclusive poles. This is also why, beyond the initial philology of the name, the idea of crisis is intimately linked to a general idea of *life*: biological life, social life, economic life, moral life, because “life” normally connotes a *positive value*, or the prevalence of positive values (such as desire, conservation, reproduction, satisfaction) over negative values. It was reserved for radically critical thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, to explain that the life we live in is a “normalized state of exception”, at the risk of identifying the overcoming of the crisis with a leap into the transcendence of another world. But it is well worth playing with this entire paradigm inherited from our philosophical tradition in order to accommodate the paradoxes of a “crisis” that combines objective and subjective uncertainty while blurring the temporal and institutional limits between different types of violence, opening a space where immediate *bifurcations* may result in radically incompatible forms of life, without revealing *ex ante* all their implications.

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21 I borrow this problematic notion from Derrida, who used it metaphorically in order to describe the self-destructive reactions of the U.S. government after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

I will stop here for today, although there are many questions which remain to be named and formulated. The next one, in my view, which we could try and address at some point in the discussion, regards the *cosmopolitical implications* of all that has been said. By definition, a pandemic is a global phenomenon, which affects mankind as a single *species*, and, in doing so makes our belonging as individuals to the same species a very material, perceptible phenomenon. This is even more the case if the common infection, as we are explained, results from the crossing of a “species barrier” between the human and some non-human animals. It seems to require something like a global government of the crisis, with adapted institutions and procedures of decision, well beyond exchanging information or even sharing vaccines if they are discovered. On the other hand, it should have been clear in what I said that a typical aspect of the crisis is exacerbating divisions based on anthropological differences and relations of domination, violently pitting some parts of mankind against others, and making the emergence of “the common” in practice a very difficult task. To which I should have added something that I almost entirely left aside, not because it was secondary in my eyes, but because I feared it would make my discussions too complicated. Therefore we should reintroduce it now: this is the fact that, although neoliberalism as a dominant regime of accumulation has some universal features, particularly its combining the exploitation of “human capital” with a destructive extraction of “natural capital”, there is no such thing as a *uniformity* of social, political, and ideological structures within the framework of globalization: on the contrary, as a “world-system” (Wallerstein) it is based on extreme polarities, between North and South, but also, equally decisive today, between East and West. They are not likely to wither away because of our common interest to fight this pandemic, to prevent others from catching us again by surprise, or to effectively confront the environmental crisis. Humankind, or the “Human race”, thus appears as objectively unified (by contagion; the circulation of commodities; by global warming) but also subjectively divided (by cultures and ideologies), or subjectively united (by some feelings of fear and hope) and objectively split among material interests (national, imperial, territorial, economic) that destroy every possibility of acting together. This deep contradiction of the idea of Mankind as a “subject-object” of history and politics might well emerge as the most insistent aporia generated and intensified by the current crisis.

Security and Solidarity

Andrea Cavalletti

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the phenomenon of the pandemic as a connection between security or freedom and solidarity. Fear and liberty are consistent, according to the famous Hobbesian saying. As Foucault explains, freedom is a functional component of the biopolitical security system, strictly related to the process of *circulation* of both people and things. The domain of such freedom is “population,” as state force: a peculiar field of relations, unlimited but defined, united and at the same time divided in classes. Definable as a polarized continuum, “population” is always strong or weak, healthy and diseased, normal or abnormal, “true” or “untrue.” The name of its internal cohesion is “solidarity”.

In this biopolitical-securitarian domain, a contagious disease (whether dormant or active) is a real and specific negativity, and its governance or “normalization” is a continuous task. More precisely, pandemic impact is not only related to welfare and environmental conditions of a “population” but coincides with its coextensive and negative state; microbic circulation is a micro-level of the social one, and transmission is a (diseased) manner of social interaction, even as physical distancing and self-quarantine are apparently paradoxical forms of social cohesiveness - i.e. of a latent illness.

It is precisely for this reason that only a new, radical form of solidarity could involve real freedom. Faced with the pandemic phenomenon, or with the real aspect of “population”, solidarity should be the loosening up of the connection between liberty and fear.

Keywords: pandemic, circulation, fear, security, freedom, class divisions, solidarity.

1. At the end of the second lecture of the series *Security, Territory, Population*, Michel Foucault recalled his research on disciplinary power by making a determining correction, in the perspective of securitarian regulation and normalization: “I said somewhere that we could not understand the establishment of liberal ideologies and a liberal politics in the eighteenth century without keeping in mind that the same eighteenth century, which made such a strong demand for freedoms, had all the same ballasted these freedoms with a disciplinary technique that [...] considerably restricted freedom and provided, as it were, guarantees for the exercise of this freedom. Well, I think I was wrong. I was not completely wrong, of course, but, in short, it was not exactly this. I think something completely different is at stake. This is that this freedom, both ideology and technique of government, should in fact be understood within the mutations and transformations of technologies of power. More precisely and particularly, freedom is nothing else but the correlative of

the deployment of apparatuses of security. An apparatus of security, in any case the one I have spoken about, cannot operate well [...] except on condition that it is given freedom, in the modern sense [the word]* acquires in the eighteenth century: no longer the exemptions and privileges attached to a person, but the possibility of movement, change of place, and processes of circulation of both people and things.”¹

Discipline and Punish actually defined the "panoptic modality of power", clearly separating it from the "structures juridico-politiques" of bourgeois society. Here, in the 1978-79 lectures, the mechanism of security is instead isolated through the double distinction from the legal system on the one hand and from the disciplinary apparatus on the other. The passage is well known: "law works in the imaginary, since the law imagines and can only formulate all the things that could and must not be done by imagining them. It imagines the negative. Discipline works [...] as it were, complementary to reality [...] security [...] tries to work within reality, by getting the components of reality to work in relation to each other, thanks to and through a series of analyses and specific arrangements.”² And this reciprocal interplay of the elements of the real is aimed, as we know, not at avoiding dangerous conditions (e.g. famine) but at achieving "normalization" and equilibrium (between poor and rich-wheat areas). It is therefore "profoundly linked to the general principle of what is called liberalism. The game of liberalism—not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course; *laissez faire*, *passer et aller*—basically and fundamentally means acting so that reality develops, goes its way, [...] according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself.”³ Freedom is here, in other words, the principle that ensures the adherence of political technique, or of safety devices, to the free play of the real in which men and things participate.

Therefore, "*I was wrong* ..., because the modern transformation of the apparatuses and practices of power could not be understood by limiting oneself to the disciplinary technique understood as coercion or as "foundation of the formal, juridical liberties.”⁴ But at the same time, I was never totally wrong ..., since it is not precisely a question of substituting the securitarian model for the disciplinarian one; just as this has not limited itself to supplanting the legal one, there is now no exclusive affirmation of freedom, and "letting do", specifies Foucault, certainly does not mean letting do everything. The rise to power of securitarian rationality thus does not imply the end of discipline (and even less that of panopticism, of course); on the contrary, it implies

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1 Foucault 2009, p.50

2 Ibid., p.49

3 Ibid.

4 Foucault 1995, p.224

the comprehension of the disciplinary system itself and of the legal system as entities of the real, as elements whose "reality develops and goes." More precisely and particularly, freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security", it is so to the point of freely putting into play and integrating the other systems into its equilibrium. If Foucault was able to correct himself, that is, if he found himself partly wrong and at the same time did not have absolutely wrong *tout à fait tort*, it is on the one hand because "the panopticism of every day [...] in the genealogy of modern society, they have been, with the class domination that traverses it, the political counterpart of the juridical norms according to which power was redistributed,⁵ and on the other hand because this "contrepartie politique" is understandable only in the sense of the "genealogy of modern society", as a correlative of freedom and securitarian devices, that is, of "a series of analysis and specific disposition of the economic normalization. If disciplines are "a sort of a counter-right" and have "role of introducing insuperable asymmetries and excluding reciprocities.”⁶ it is because they are consistent with the same "class domination that traverses it" [society] and at the same time with the "freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security". On the other hand, it is true that it was the same "economists" who had the technique of power in the play of reality, that invented the modern use of the term class: dividing the population into classes means bringing it back to a discrete number of elements of reality.; or, according to the formula of Mirabeau's *Friend of the People*, "to state from where the revenue comes, how it is distributed... in which places it is lost, in which places it is reproduced", that is "to formulate a division of the social order, because we deal with people, through the unique criterion of the relations to the production of wealth.”⁷ The disciplinary classification of bodies, corresponds and thus adapts to that which puts in work the distinction of a series of elements and of their free play - or of their economic relations - in the heart of society itself; the dissymmetries that it introduces are consistent with the new freedom, which is not formal and juridical, but is a freedom of movement, of wealth and of people, managed at the statistical level and marked by class distinction and domination.

2. It was Hobbes who linked freedom so tightly to the security apparatus, that is, tied it indissolubly to the negative pole of fear. In *The Leviathan*, the exercise of sovereignty corresponds, according to the well-known phrasing from Carl Schmitt, to the "effective and present performance of

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5 Ibid., p.225

6 ibid, p.224

7 Piguet 1996, p. 48

a real protection"⁸ : it applies exclusively within the city walls and as long as the sovereign is able to ensure the freedom (i.e. the safe movement) of the citizen. If these fail the sovereign on the one hand and its subject on the other logically cease to be such. Thus, the man who is no longer free to move, that is, forced into prison, has every reason to try to escape since the pact in his case has failed. Consistently, those who do not lock their homes or turn without protection - thus showing that they do not recognize the security principle, that is, the coherence of freedom and fear - place themselves outside the civil condition.

Since its evolution in the eighteenth-century, the model started to become openly dynamic: security is now an end to be pursued and which can only be achieved thanks to adequate solicitation, that is, under the pressure of fear. Dynamism is therefore a function of the balance between fear and hope, repulsion and attraction. Freedom or security is defined between these poles, and is, in turn, always anew desirable and solicitable.

Insecurity is therefore not pushed outside the city, but becomes the negative and efficient pole of the securitarian devices themselves. After a first series of adjustments, fine-tuning and sometimes admirable simplifications, towards the end of the eighteenth century, technologies replaced the impossible claim to completely protect with the ability to make protection desired, thus managing to transform weakness in a strong point. It will then be a question, not of eliminating the risks, but on the contrary highlighting them, of selecting and maintaining that specific threat against which it can be offered or made to believe that it can offer protection, or, if necessary, to produce it. This lucky formula of security techniques is not afraid of contradictions, and continues to act throughout the centuries.

Thus, it is understood how the same "liberty-genic" device⁹ may at times prove counterproductive, without however really entering into crisis: even in this way, they will in fact succeed in provoking the request for a freedom that once again is consistent with their functioning.

3. Marked by distinction and class domination, the freedom of movement of goods or of people, is coessential to securitarian normalization: the "population", the specific object that biopower produces and controls - as Foucault explained - is a classified multitude, disciplined and marked by levels of life which are either desirable or fearful, by collaborating polarities of risk and well-being. Be it when it reveals itself as the true "strength of the state" (Mirabeau), or when it is conceived as the "*Maximum* of strength of a given number of people" (Rousseau), it itself

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8 Schmitt 1995, p.53

9 Foucault, 2010, p. 70

divides between: the "right" or "true" population (Gianmaria Ortes), that is coherent with the needs, objectives and governmental strategies, and the "false" or "apparent" population, both close and foreign to the first, which it casts in a negative shadow. The great division into classes can then simplify its own scheme, that is to put in order, make intelligible and manageable, that variability of infinitesimal degrees which marks each individual, making his condition coveted or undesirable. Discipline collaborates to this micrologic definition, and carries out thus the grafting of singularities in the *en masse* classification of the social body.

The standard of living is a standard of protection, and risk exposure increases inversely with social rank. As Marx showed, capital captures and in turn makes this disparity productive, indeed by producing it, it historically reproduces itself, because the increase in excess labor in relation to the necessary one, that is, the relative surplus value, translates into a population that is "apparent" or, better still, in "surplus": "Only in the mode of production based on capital does pauperism appear as a result of labor itself, of the development of the labor force. At a certain stage of social production, becomes overpopulation what at another stage would not be deemed such, and which could have different effects.¹⁰ The surplus of people thus constitutes, with the famous quote from *The Capital*, a useful "reserve army": "capital, since it constantly reproduces itself as surplus capital, tends to create this pauperism and at the same time to suppress it. It acts in two opposite directions, and from time to time, one or the other tendency prevails."¹¹ But this double, ambiguous capacity for action is already implicit in the securitarian order, which produces and makes use of insecurity, that is, the insecure population, and therefore has as a correlation a certain freedom that, belonging to some, is denied to others. That is, one or the other trend of capital prevails, in a historical development that corresponds to the dynamism of the security model.

The very definition of "population" is in fact, right from the encyclopedic entry of Damilaville, a relationship, a variation between the number of inhabitants and the territory, or between the former and the available wealth. The population P is obtained from N (number of inhabitants) / T (territory: i.e. the resources it offers). And if we substitute capital for this last variable, we understand how it is a direct expression of the relationship between the number of inhabitants and the population (or the labor force) useful and necessary for production. But the population of Damilaville is also, and more evidently, a relation between inhabitants and available space. Therefore, its excessive size will also correspond in this case to a bad spatial distribution ratio (of which the

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10 Marx 1953, p. 498

11 Ibid., p.503

Jewish ghettos provided the canonical example at the time). The standard of living is spatially marked and the class division (or exploitation, or surplus labor) restores the balance: the population becomes true, it becomes an economically efficient force, when the overpopulation itself (the unfavorable relationship between the number of inhabitants and size of the built-up area) becomes a class prerogative. Less space (that is, a space measured first of all by the concentration of the means of production) or less freedom, less movement for those on the lower classes, means more space and freedom for the upper ones. Once again, the discipline that distributes and closes and puts in boxes, responds to the fundamentals of economic-political logic. The same mechanism produces the search for freedom, and this, born in compulsion and poverty, not only does not radically contradict capital which operates in a double and opposite way to itself (and is therefore unable to contradict itself), but prepares the moment in which its anti-pauperistic tendency will be able to assert itself.

4. If the logically rigorous bond of protection established in Hobbes (at least literally) a limit between the natural freedom of the individual and sovereign right, the new configuration of the security model manages to break it down. Now, the inscription in the power relationship does not amount to the factual provision of protection: the citizen does not become a citizen by virtue of the protection that the sovereign assures him, but by the same insecurity that animates him internally. The sovereign power that is no longer subjected to the condition established by Hobbes: coincides therefore with the population itself, and in this it knows no limits; it inscribes the obligation in the intimacy of the subject and it makes his will coincide with the sovereign will of all. Thus, together with that of power, the very nature of citizens is redefined: when protection according to them corresponds perfectly to their exposure to danger, they have transferred *their very lives* to the sovereign. In the words of Rousseau (*Du contrat social*, I, IV), "The very life which they have devoted to the State is continuously protected by it; and when they expose that life in its defence, what are they then doing but giving back to the State what they have received from it?". When Schmitt affirms that being ready to die defines the political character of a people, he will give the latter a definition which is actually perfectly biopolitical and securitarian, consistent with the "maximum of strength", and closer to Rousseau than to Hobbes.

We know very well that the "life... devoted to the state" and at the same time "received from it" will be the object of the great medical-political investment, capable of distinguishing exactly in the body of the population, the subjects with healthy and productive behaviors, from those with sick, unproductive and burdensome behaviors, while organizing spaces, building cities, "curing machines" and the housing

itself. Now, medicine takes care of the population, but this also constitutes the field of intelligibility to which science itself refers and amounts, is specified and specializes: as a science of the population, in the double meaning of the genitive. Like their heirs, hygienists or urban planners, political doctors are no strangers to the body they treat, and the same "force of the state" is both exercised and empowered in them. This force is in fact none other than the population itself. Therefore, the medicine that separates and confines, that nourishes, heals and improves, that specializes and divides while building the healthy social body by isolating it from the abnormal, is but this very body that discovers itself, knows itself, and knowing itself grows and branches out, inspect and cure and improve himself. Each new discovery is a self-discovery and marks a new self-demonstrating stage of the same force within the framework of state rationality.

5. In his important book on Pasteur, *Les microbes. Guerre et paix* [The Microbes. War and Piece] (1984), Bruno Latour defined the discovery of microbes as a redefinition of the social body. He then insisted that this re-composition is preliminary to the police-like intervention of the twentieth-century hygienists: if they are able to act, exercising effective control, it is only because the battle has already been won in the laboratories. The intervention of the hygienists, technically specialized and operative, still derives from the police science and from the political medicine (or medical police) of the eighteenth century, which in all respects were a knowledge of the population, that is of the *polis* as its privileged living environment. In the same way that these sciences defined and built the social body, starting from the spaces and fluids that flowed through them (i.e. describing an urban square as a reserve of pure air, a source of healthy life or a lung to equip the social body), thus the discovery of microbes was a new, more precise, revolutionary vision on the population and its specific spatiality. The population is a set of bodies that move within the environment, and both population and environment are crossed by healthy or diseased, harmful or beneficial, infectious or disinfectant microbes. And if on the body of the population itself, on the great body-environment of the state force, the areas of positivity or the spots of the right vital intensity already appeared, these areas will cross also the individuals and the environments in which they move, and the battles of the antibodies in the smallest of organisms are but the microscopic appearances of the macro-inflammations that can afflict large cities and entire regions. In other words, microbiological specialization belongs to the same medical-political rationality and provides it with a new, decisive point of support (Latour). The discovery and treatment of the microbe is a discovery and sanitation of the social body that that little being permeates and unites at all levels: therefore, it can give a new coherence to the exercise of small disciplines (e.g. personal hygiene) and the statistical plan of

the major moments of regulation (e.g. the distribution of vaccines). If microorganisms form the appreciable, manipulable, manageable medium of all circulations, if they unite the mobility of all bodies by permeating and moving in them (and thanks to them), if each individual body is but a temporary arrangement of the microbial flow itself, then what is pasteurized is the population itself, and circulation defines not only the form of freedom but the form of life. So, not only is security a freedom of movement internally solicited by danger, but existence as such is a circulation both free and dangerous at the same time: microbial life (that is, life as a real entity) is strengthened by fighting, defense and risk, death and survival, are mixed in it, abiding only to the law of unstable equilibrium. The mutual dependence of the elements, or the solidarity of beings, is meanwhile reduced to this microbiological domain of life or of the population. And if it is true, as Deleuze pointed out, that Leibniz's baroque metaphysics is already closely connected with the discovery of new living beings within the organism, it is also true that an essential change is now taking place. It is a limitation, a boundary that delimits the field of causes and effects, or a caesura of which the neo-Leibnizian contemporaries of Pasteur, such as Charles Renouvier and Gabriel Tarde had a precise awareness: the first signaled that the actions, the affections and reactions that spread, from the small distance of the molecules in barely perceptible lengths, and then to the greater ones, involve an idea of transmission ordered to the "biological regime" therefore, "society is solidarity", is very different from the harmony of relations imagined by Leibniz, who on the contrary does not accept any limits, does not admit any term or obstacle to the propagation of movements.¹² Tarde, the author so loved by Latour, has superimposed and made monadology coincide with sociology, reducing the metaphysical plane to that of organic life. For him, every relationship is both social and vital, and as variable as the strength of the population: "The vitality of organisms, that is the intimate solidarity of their parts, rises or falls continuously."¹³

Observed by a philosopher or a sociologist, or under the microscope by a biologist, this field of solidarity relationships is nothing but the domain of securitarian devices, where capital has been able to install itself by monopolizing circulation: surplus value marks the threshold of positive and negative, strength is wealth, and exposure to danger is no longer a concomitant variable to protection but is co-essential to life, when this "life itself" is divided into classes.

12 Renouvier, 1903, pp. 55-56

13 Tarde, 1999, p. 90: Gabriel Tarde, *Monadology and Sociology*, re.press Melbourne, 2002, 55

6. It is from this point of view that the current pandemic can be observed, shifting our gaze from the most conspicuous and coercive manifestation of the devices. The renewed Pasteurian structure of political medicine has indeed provided a striking demonstration of the fact that the population does not exist except in the discoveries and recompositions of itself: being only a function of the number of people and the environment they inhabit, it is nothing but the living organization, teeming with microbes that cross both the people and the environment. Even the illness is thus rigorously redefined, at this level, as a pathogen that has its limits, capable of living only inside the microbes. Again: the virus that appears to penetrate and spread like an enemy in a body made of billions of bodies and infinite particles, and whose way of existing is called contagion, was in a sense already there, it is the same "population" (in both the broader and the more precise meanings of the term, as the unity of living beings and as their environment) which is now reconfigured and revealed, according to the specific mode of its appearance; indeed, as the distinguished "false" and the "true" population of before, now appear together, the one (the illness) certifying the existence of itself in the existence of the other. In the contagion the population itself looks and discovers itself, and while it infects itself it manifests itself as the vitality of relationships that decreases or increases, as positivity that defends itself and lives or yields to its infectious part. The gradualness of the contagion, which "rises or falls continuously", is the expression of a collective life that is internally distinguished, advances on itself, reaches a balance only to lose and regain it, that is, it coincides with its inexhaustible process of normalization; and the daily statistics are updates, clarifications and graphic resolutions of the ancient eighteenth-century function: they make the "true population" appear in contrast with the sick one, as "maximum de force" or as a lower mortality rate, a better ratio of healthy and sick individuals, or a better ratio of inhabitants and medical devices. The "strength" is its management, life comes from its government. And again: strength appears in the encounter with a resistance or when it resists its opposite, showing itself as strength and life together, and sees itself in its yielding, recognizes itself as such or subjectivizes itself and takes charge of itself. The sick person is a danger to others and he also becomes other to himself by joining others in the personal struggle for survival. Precisely this unavoidable reference to oneself, this identification of the subject as a member of the population, this link, whether latent or actual, of the self to oneself and of one with the other, corresponds, according to the legal expression of the device, to the legal bond of solidarity (defined for example in art. 2 of the Italian Constitution, as a "mandatory duty"): each individual is defined as responsible for the common security (or well-being) to which he should sacrifice - or give back - a part of his personal freedom. Here, of course, "freedom" and "security" hardly have to conceal their synonymy, and

the former must hide its negative correlative. That is, the Constitutional Charter could be read in watermark: some have to sacrifice - or give up - their security, being bound to those who will see their freedoms protected in this way, or will give up part of their insecurity in exchange. The microscopic penetration of the deadly into the vital, the solidarity of the two or the coincidence of danger with "life itself" (of free circulation with the epidemic) thus finds a superstructural expression consistent with the social order divided into classes. At a new level of subjectivation, the sense of insecurity and the demand for protection grow meanwhile to become a paroxysm.

7. "The graph's good today," he would remark, rubbing his hands. To his mind the disease had reached what he called high-water mark. Thereafter it could but ebb."¹⁴ But illness does not call itself illness, and when it has a name and is described in a graph, it no longer attacks the population from the outside. While the danger is not cancelled but normalized, it is the security regulation itself that reaches its "level", just as the population (microbial, solidary, or viral) finds its most acute self-evidence in the epidemic. And it would be more correct to say that the revolution of modern bacteriology has finally solved the age-old problem of spreads, endemics, epidemics or pandemics, and their specific locations. If "the fundament of the epidemic is not the plague, the phlegm" it is not even the pungent air of Nîmes in winter or the putrid air of Paris in summer¹⁵: these conditions are rather the environmental variables of an inexhaustible, immanent or absolute circulation (which should be called at the same time life, population, or even pandemic) which appears and reveals itself openly as such only due to an evident imbalance and a new adjustment in the its unlimited domain. This function is now in force on a world scale and the most (at least apparently) inept systems of government, which also give free rein to illness, correspond to the most active ones, and find their internal equilibrium point as a reflection of a variable external equilibrium, or of a continuous normalization in the great space of planetary circulation. Meanwhile, the social classification shows itself in an exasperated way, in the exposure to risk - or rather to the equally asymmetrical consequences of its management. At the statistical-regulatory level, the areas of positivity that the maps or graphs highlight, correspond to those of the most violent deprivation. The social distinction must then be evident and claimed by the interested parties themselves: with the lockdown and the tracking, the safety devices provoke in the most evident way the request for the same freedom consistent with their functioning, acting as suggestive mechanisms on the petty-bourgeois

¹⁴ Camus 1948, p. 196

¹⁵ Foucault 1963, pp. 22-23

crowd that claims among their rights, first of all, that of existing, that is, of gathering together; this reaction corresponds by contrast, by hiding it, to the condition of those who are meanwhile deprived of the right to speak, that is, transformed into purely objective labor-power, which must give up most of their freedom or face greater risk in the production of surplus value itself. What makes both positions coherent is precisely the solidarity essence of an entity, however crossed by antagonisms, such as the population, where the danger or constraint of one is linked to the protection and freedom of the other, the condition of the lower to its denial by the upper, for their own use and consumption.

8. With the appearance of the virus as a leading actor, it is the theater of biopower that has fully unfolded, that is, the scenario of securitarian devices, of the partitions and the of the most marked dissymmetries, the apparatuses of control, the run-in mechanisms of discipline. And if in the meantime the graph of illness can appear good or excellent, reaching the *level*, it is precisely because *contagion and biopolitical solidarity are coherent*; because a population exists and is managed, according to the criterion of production relations and the circulation of wealth to which the same emergency provisions remain subject. Some bonds are tightened, and with these the relative freedom to sacrifice, the disciplinary to the regulation.

But perhaps the possible resolution of the biopower constraint lies precisely here. If the current social order can in fact unite its members *in its own way*, conceiving them as elements of solidarity by associating in a gradual *continuum* the protection of one with the risk and exposure to death of the other, solidarity does not necessarily have to correspond to the determinations of the social and its statutes, and it can as well be not limited to a behavior disciplined by the rules and the protective devices. It is no coincidence that today, when a state of emergency is decreed, the rhetorical praise of such behavior is combined with a plaintive attachment to the rules that guarantee "my freedom": "an security-apparatus [dispositif] can work well [...] only under the condition [...] that one gives it something that is freedom"; and an attitude like "at the same time ideology and technique of government", has its counterpart in the fear, enslavement and ruthless violence of neoliberalism. Precisely the technique of governance, that is the structure of free circulation, is based on the bond that unites beings, or precisely on the biopolitical continuity that the medical police and then microbiology have made intelligible and of which the pandemic is the crudest manifestation. However, this bond tightens a life dedicated to the state, bestowed by the state, and which is defined as "life itself" only from a state perspective; what it makes perfectly unitary and in solidarity is none other than the very field of the rationality of government. The freedom we give up, in fact, is not exactly the security we receive in return (otherwise there would be no

renunciation, let alone as an "imperative duty"): between one and the other the securitarian device is inserted instead, which connects and maintains in relation, or in a variable equilibrium, assignment and gain, the protected life of the one and the life exposed to danger of the other, protects a freedom which basically is "my freedom" to let the other die.

The mythologem of "life itself" or of the "intimate solidarity" of the social organism can therefore only be replaced by a solidarity which is vital in itself or a life of solidarity which does not impose sacrifices, which is neither given nor received, nor is owing to nobody. Conceiving this solidarity in itself unlimited, and dissolved by the biopolitical domination of normalization, means implementing it: this seems to be the least obvious and at the same time most urgent thing today.

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

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Morbus Anglicus; or, Pandemic, Panic, Pandaemonium

Justin Clemens

Abstract: Mid-17th century England births two fateful new signifiers: pandemic and pandaemonium. Although both words are founded on a Greek root *pan*, meaning all, neither designate a firm or flourishing polity. The words also retain close etymological, homophonic, and semantic relations to another crucial word of the time: panic. Yet these terms do not simply indicate the destruction or abolition of politics or the political, but rather reconstitute the problem of politics according to a radical paradox. This essay examines the emergence and reconstitution of these signifiers in a philological matrix inflected by plague, civil war, religious violence, scientific inquiry, and monarchical restoration, in order to proffer several theses about their significance and operations in and for politics that subsists beyond the specificities of that site.

Keywords: Panic, Pandemic, Pandaemonium, Giorgio Agamben, Thomas Hobbes, John Milton.

*Fama erebat enim, sparsitque per oppida nostra
Extremum genti classe venire diem;
Atque metum concepit tunc mea mater
Ut pareret geminos meque metumque simul.¹*
Thomas Hobbes, *Life*

'yet is there great difference between *spot and spot*, *plague and plague*.'
John Sheffeld, *The hypocrites ladder*

We're all in this together. Whatever this phrase — which circulates everywhere in 2020 — might mean, it is simultaneously unclear, imprecise, and offensive. As a kind of anticipated proof of its unbiddable obscurity, mid-17th century England births two fateful new signifiers, still momentous today: *pandemic* and *pandaemonium*. Although both words are founded on a Greek root *pan*, meaning *all*, neither designate a firm or flourishing polity — precisely putting into question the status of the 'we,' the 'all,' the 'this' and the 'together.' Yet neither term simply indicates the destruction or abolition of politics or the political, but rather reconstitutes the problem

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¹There are a number of near-contemporaneous English translations of this verse, e.g., 'For Fame had rumour'd, that a Fleet at Sea,/Wou'd cause our Nations Catastrophe;/And hereupon it was my Mother Dear/Did bring forth Twins at once, both Me, and Fear,' Anon. 1680, p. 2. Another version runs: 'For Fame now raised and scattered through the land/News that the day of judgment was at hand,/Which struck so horribly my mother's ear/That she gave birth to twins, myself and fear.' I would also like to thank Joseph Hughes and Tom Ford for their extensive critical remarks on a draft version of this essay.

according to a radical paradox. The words furthermore retain close etymological, homophonic, and semantic relations to another crucial word of the time, perhaps for all times: *panic*. This essay examines the emergence and reconstitution of these signifiers in a philological matrix inflected by plague, civil war, religious violence, scientific inquiry, and monarchical restoration, in order to proffer several new theses about their significance and operations in and for politics that subsists beyond the specificities of that site. This examination will move from the political, medical, and literary ferment of the 17th century back to Plato, before returning to Thomas Hobbes and John Milton. It concludes with several methodological remarks about the status of what Jacques Lacan would call *lalangue* or a kind of ‘political unconscious’ of language itself.

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In 1666, Gideon Harvey published *Morbus Anglicus*, the *English Sickness*. In characteristic 17th century style, the full title of this treatise spares no detail of its contents:

*Morbus anglicus: or, The anatomy of consumptions Containing the nature, cause, subject, progress, change, signes, prognosticks, preservatives; and several methods of curing all consumptions, coughs, and spitting of blood. With remarkable observations touching the same diseases. To which are added, some brief discourses of melancholy, madness, and distraction occassioned by love. Together with certain new remarques touching the scurvy and ulcers of the lungs. The like never before published.*²

Harvey, a successful London physician who had been educated at Oxford and Leiden,³ was concerned, as the title suggests, with what he figured as the *national* character of the condition. The title concerns itself not only with the physical vicissitudes of the disease that is consumption — tuberculosis, which directly affects the lungs of those it afflicts — but, in accordance with a kind of physico-philological confusion, moreover promises to treat of several associated disorders of love, etc. (which, as we will see, remain surprisingly germane to the matter). Yet, if we are still in the realm of the humours, of the transmission of diseases through

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2 Harvey 1666, title page. According to Cesari et al. 2011, the term also signified what we now call ‘rickets’: ‘the first clear descriptions of rickets were provided by Daniel Whistler in 1645 and by Francis Glisson in 1650 in England, where this condition was endemic at the time; it was even called *morbus anglicus*, or “the English disease.”’ The translation of Glisson’s Latin treatise into English uses the term *morbo puerili*; its chapter XIX poses the question ‘Why this Disease happeneth more frequently in England, then in other countreys?’ There, the reasons for specifying a disease by a national modifier are clearly enumerated, as wide distribution (‘frequency’), topical inclemency, greatness of topical inclemency, frequency of recurrence: see Glisson 1651, pp. 202-3. There was evidently a widespread (pandemic?) drive to typify a disease in national terms at the time.

3 Wallis 2008.

miasma, of a fondness for organology and Aristotelian-style taxonomies, something new is also materializing.

For it is in justifying his nomination of this *morbus* as characteristically *anglicus*, that Harvey mobilizes a fateful signifier. He writes: ‘Some diseases do more generally haunt a Country... whence such diseases are termed Endemick or Pandemick.’⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is the first attested use of *pandemic* in English to denominate the universal spread of a disease. The year — 1666 — is of course not insignificant in English epidemiological history either: it is the year of the Great Fire of London, which itself followed the last Great Plague of 1665. Indeed, in 1665, Harvey had himself already rushed *A Discourse of the Plague* into print, which spoke of ‘The Nature, Causes, Signs, and Presages of the Pestilence in general. Together with the state of the present Contagion.’⁵ What we might today call an epidemiological state of emergency is unsurprisingly the occasion for the word’s appearance as such in English medical texts: it concerns not only a contagion that is widespread and virulent across a particular locale or locales, but the whole of the people *per se*. Harvey’s tract itself seems to have been moderately successful, being reprinted at least twice within the decade; the word itself has enjoyed an even better run.

Let us moreover note that Harvey’s leading syntagm *morbus anglicus* wasn’t always strictly applied to consumptive disorders alone. The scurrilous playwright Robert Greene, notorious early critic of none other than William Shakespeare, and decisive contributor to the popular genre of ‘coney catching’ — ribald tales of con-men and -women — had already applied it over 70 years before Harvey to the syphilitic pox in his 1592 text *A Disputation, Betweene a Hee Conny-Catcher, and a Shee Conny-Catcher, whether a Theefe or a Whoore, is most hurtfull in Cousonage, to the Common-wealth*. ‘Whensoueu it first grew,’ announces Greene’s saucy whore Nan a Traffique, ‘it is so surely now rooted in England, that by S. (Syth) it may better be called *A Morbus Anglicus* then *Gallicus*.’⁶ Greene’s sally — that the French pox was now so entrenched that it was to be considered native to English soil — compounds the *con* with the *con* with the *con*, *connerie* with *conny* with *contagion*, deception with sexuality with infection. This triple *con* is articulated with (or by) yet another *con*, with the *with* itself, the Latinate prefix of binding. Whatever *together* is, is in other words, freighted by this conning *with*.⁷ And it is not

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4 Harvey 1666, 1.2.

5 Harvey 1665, title page.

6 Greene 1592, np.

7 Indeed, in 17th century English, ‘con’ could also mean a rap with the knuckles or to steer a ship, and could be homophonic and homonymic with cunning, conning (as in knowing), canny (wise), etc. A coney is a rabbit, both the animal, and ‘a bunny’ as one still can say of a potential dupe.

just the content of the conny-catching pamphlets that is important, but their form: their success as a genre was one of the preconditions for the massive explosion of comparable printed materials through the century.⁸

The word *morbus* was indeed popularly variably applied for its mixed medical-moral significations. In 1657, only a few years prior to Harvey's medical disquisitions, John Sheffeld, the soon-to-be-ejected minister at St. Swithins, had published his own fulmination against the Protestant disease par excellence: hypocrisy. Sheffeld's title does the job you might expect: *The hypocrites ladder, or looking-glasse. Or A discourse of the dangerous destructive nature of hypocrisie, the reigning and provoking sin of this age*. Sheffeld writes of hypocrisy as 'Wee had once, our Chronicles tell us, a disease very infective and destructive to the English called *Morbus*, or *sudor Anglicus*, the Sweating Sickness.... this is a worse disease with which the English are now tainted, this may bee called *Morbus Anglicus*, too properly.'⁹ Four years later, we find an anonymous preacher writing in similar vein that 'possible it is for men (yea too ordinary) to fall from grace: the Text supposeth it, and in another place, *Heb. 12.15* the Apostle *Items* us to *look diligently lest any fall from the grace of God*, the Angels did so at first, and *Adam* soon after, and that which was *Morbus Angelicus* then, is *Morbus Anglicus* now.'¹⁰ À la the famous Pereckian lipogramatic fiction *La Disparition*, the excision of the letter *e* irreparably marks by its absence the Fall of the English from their angelic ancestry.

The revivification of the Latin pun *angels/Angles* clearly does a lot of work for the 17th century English, as indeed does the pun *mors* (death)/*morbus*. Disease, death, spiritual sin, and medical morbidity: these are self-evidently fundamental terms of a *national* politics as much as they are of physic, which are seeking their paradoxical binding in a new substantive.¹¹ As we can see in the otherwise diverse uses made of *morbus anglicus* by Greene, Harvey, and Sheffeld, it manifests as a sickness that bears the name of the nation, of the people itself. Whatever the differences that these authors intend by the name — pox, hypocrisy, consumption — the disease remains at once physiological, sexual, and theologico-political. Utterly real, it is spread by the promiscuous mingling of dissimulating bodies. It affects — or threatens to affect — everyone. The whole, the all, of the polity is at stake. One can immediately see why a new adjective such as *pandemick* might just pop out under the pressure of such febrile circumstances.

8 See Bayman 2007; Raymond 2003.

9 Sheffeld 1657, np.

10 Anon 1661, p. 74.

11 For an unexpected modern revivification of the term *Morbus Anglicus*, this time in the context of the 'invasion of Anglo-American terms' into contemporary Italian, see Castellani 1987.

Yet Harvey's is not the first known use of the word in the language. It had recently been used in the bitter context of late-Commonwealth political pamphleteering. In 1659, the millennial Fifth Monarchist writer John Rogers had published *Diapoliteia*, an attack on Richard Baxter, William Prynne, and James Harrington, in which he had announced that:

it is a *wicked thing* to appoint the *equality* simply, altogether according *to tother* (i.e., upon the whole *number*, or Promiscuous *Chaos* of the people.) And it appears from what happens, that no *Commonwealth* of this kind, hath *stability*, or can stand long! (mark that!) and the reason is this, because it is impossible from the first error committed in the beginning (or first laying of the *Commonwealth*) there should not happen some *extream evil*, or other. Thus far for the *sence* (and sentence) of his own *Oracle* (to name no more) against such an unjust *Equality of Pandemick Government* and foundation; without distinction of *Dignitaries*, or discrimination of the *Good* from the *Bad*, as a very unadvised thing, that will certainly *rob* the *well-affected* of their *Rights*! give them up to the *Dammees* of the Times! and but put them into an *equal capacity* for present! and into an under-capacity for future! (or by unavoidable consequence, through *over-balance of Number*) with their *enemies*!¹²

Rogers here makes a distinction between the *number* of the people (the whole) and their *worthiness* to govern (their dignity). The whole of the people — as a 'promiscuous chaos,' a 'pandemick government' — would inevitably entail for Rogers the engulfment of Reason, and the collapse of the government into something like Hobbes' state of nature, a war of all against all. Yet he agreed with Harrington that 'both desired a commonwealth, adding that we can live "with more freedom" if there are no lords. He opposed monarchy and cried up the Good Old Cause.'¹³ The barrier against the chaos of numerical distribution — whether by all (democracy), some (aristocracy), or one (tyranny), by tithes and law — would require a rule by the 'saints,' the messianically-driven conviction of the Fifth Monarchists. If we hardly need add that this dream did not eventuate, one can immediately see the crypto-Leninist commitment: Rogers envisages a vanguard of steely-minded, exemplary men who will lead and govern the people to salvation through action, not inheritance.

12 Rogers 1659, p. 78. As Christopher Hill summarizes the Fifth Monarchist position: they 'believed that the reign of Christ upon earth was shortly to begin. This view was held by many respectable Independent divines, who drew no directly political conclusions. But for less-educated laymen, under the economic stress of the revolutionary decades, especially after the defeat of the Levellers and the dissolution of the Barebones Parliament, Fifth Monarchy became a desperately held hope,' 168. See also Hill 2016, pp. 51-68; Strumia 1989.

13 Hill 2016, p. 60; Hammersley 2013.

The book's alarming title — which one might be tempted to mistranslate into a more contemporary idiom as *Dissensus* — directs its attentions to the political splitting and traversal of the body politic, which is precisely figured in medical terms. *Diapoliteia* expressly addresses itself to the Council of State, in presenting the Commonwealth anatomically, physiologically, pathologically, as a body mangled or otherwise maltreated by the attentions of politico-theological butchers such as Prynne: 'As to the Gentleman's SKILL, it is apparent to most men, that he succeeds more in the *Ektomy* & *Apotomy* (or most cruel incision & wounding) then in the true Art or *Anatomy* of the *Commonwealth*... (with a rough, rash, rending, vulnerary *Dissecting*, or rather Bis-secting (in his two Books) of the most Principal Members of it, without order, Rule or Reason in it.'¹⁴ Rogers' rhetoric also shows a propensity for organ medicaments: Physick, Hepaticks, Cephalicks, and so forth. What is precisely lacking from the botched dissections and prescriptions of his enemies is a true *panacea*, a spiritual cure-all for the ills of the commonwealth.

Although the Fifth Monarchists were obliterated as any kind of social or political movement by the Restoration, Rogers himself survived to study — what else! — medicine in Holland, before returning to England... where he possibly died in the 1665 plague. In any case, it is certain that — like most if not all of his interlocutors — Rogers had knowledge not only of the Galenic, but of more strictly philosophical antecedents of the term *pandemic*.

Certainly, the adjectives *pandemial* and *pandemical* had already been in sparing use in English medical and theological texts since the mid-16th century, deriving from the *pandemus* of post-classical Latin, itself an incorporation from the Greek. One religious controversialist, the Puritan minister and unlicensed medical practitioner Alexander Leighton had deployed it in his *Speculum belli sacri* of 1624, written in the form of a military treatise: 'I haue laid open (according to my small skill) the *pandemicall* diseases of warr, together with the remedies: by the way, I haue touched vpon domestick affaires: and in all this course I haue made the sacred word the *loadstone*, the *compasse*, and the *lesbian rule*, whereby to square and direct all the rest.'¹⁵ The formation *pandemial* is even older. Given this context, is there then any real difference between 'pandemical' and 'pandemic,' other than a minor, irrelevant excision of the little letters 'all'?

Three brief remarks. First, it is at the very least amusing that the

¹⁴ Rogers 1659, p. 3. Note the cruelty of Rogers' rhetoric, in that it alludes to Prynne's physical torments following two famous trials in the 1630s: found guilty of sedition by the Star Chamber in 1633, Prynne's ears had been 'lightly cropped'; after the 1637 reappearance before the chamber, his ears were fully excised, his nose was slit, and the initials S.L. (for 'Seditious Libeller') were branded on his cheeks in a public torment that was moreover badly botched by the executioner.

¹⁵ Leighton 1624, np. Not irrelevantly, Leighton himself had been an intimate of Prynne's, and himself suffered public torments and mutilation.

word *pan* in Greek means *all*, which suggests the latter's vanishing is simultaneously a kind of vanquishing of a trans-lingual semantic redundancy. Second, the suffix 'all' or 'al' is a signature adjectival termination in English.¹⁶ Its disappearance in *pandemic* nudges the word towards a more typically nominal form.¹⁷ On the model of quasi-technical terms like *prognostic* or *hypochondriac*, *emetic*, and *cathartic* — frequently used both nominally and adjectivally in the period — we will posit that a *crypto-nominalization* is at play, an instance of the null conversion or zero derivation that so often occurs in English, such that 'pandemic' is no-longer-simply-adjectival yet not-yet-nominal. Third, this period is widely considered to have given the decisive impetus to the forging of a new kind of scientific discourse in English, one of whose key operations is precisely such a nominalization.¹⁸

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Not insignificantly, the *locus classicus* for *pandemic* comes from none other than 'the divine Plato' himself (to use a phrase beloved by Sigmund Freud). In the *Symposium*, Pausanias is the second of the assembled speakers following Phaedrus, who had himself identified Eros as the oldest of the gods, and the greatest benefactor of humanity. In Phaedrus' wake, Pausanias announces that:

you will all agree, gentlemen, that without Love, there could be no such goddess as Aphrodite. If, then, there were only one goddess of that name, we might suppose that there was only one kind of Love, but since in fact there are two such goddesses there must also be two kinds of Love. No one, I think, will deny that there are two goddesses of that name — one, the elder, sprung from no mother's womb but from the heavens themselves, we call the Uranian, the heavenly Aphrodite, while the younger, daughter of Zeus and Dione, we call Pandemus, the earthly Aphrodite.¹⁹

Eros, too, supposedly follows the division of Aphrodite into *Uranian* and *Pandemos*: pandemic love is the love of men and women, of bodies,

¹⁶ The suffix *-al*, according to the OED, is used for 'forming adjectives with the sense "of or relating to that which is denoted by the first element,"' and is attested in forms such as *-ale*, *-alle*, *-ell*, *-ell*, *-al*, *-all* from the 16th century on.

¹⁷ Trevian 2015 remarks that 'Whether separable or not, *-ic*... is chiefly adjectival. Over 90% of the *-ic* words delivered by the Corpus are labelled as adjectives only. Most of the remaining 10% are described in dictionaries as alternately adjectival and nominal,' p. 21. The latter is now indeed the case for *pandemic*, which is, moreover, also exceptional in that it contravenes the principle that 'The suffix *-ic* is theoretically always denominal' (as we shall see in more detail below).

¹⁸ On the operations and ordering implications of nominalization in scientific discourse, see the classic account of Halliday 2004; also Bello 2016.

¹⁹ Plato 1961, p. 534-535, 180d.

whereas Uranian love is that love which inspires enthusiasm for *arete* (excellence, virtue, thriving). The word *pandemos* itself derives immediately from 'pan' (all, everything, and also from the name for the theriomorphic god), and 'demos' (the people). *Pandemos* is earth-born and earth-borne, mixing men, women, and boys rapidly and indiscriminately in its shallow quest for enjoyment. Uranian love, by contrast, is (allegedly) not vitiated by femininity nor by vulgar physicality as it is linked to 'a goddess whose attributes... are altogether male': an older elite man selects a younger elite man for physico-psycho-pedagogical ends. The mob versus the cosmos, then, a false or degraded universal versus an elite universal.

In his commentary on Pausanias in *Seminar VIII*, Jacques Lacan notes that the former offers 'the discourse of a social observer' in his descriptions of the laws of love in the Greek world — an account of the production and operations of social values in the sphere of love — before linking the spirit of Pausanias's account to the contemporary story of 'a rich Calvinist.'²⁰ Lacan underlines that Pausanias approves of the Athenian legal restrictions insofar as they are concerned with a certain goal of virtue. The beloved, though younger than the lover, must already have some power of nascent discernment, just as the older, exemplary lover must be seeking something virtuous in the beloved. The lover provides *phronesis* and an entrée to *arete*; the beloved stands to gain *paideia*, education, and *sophia*, wisdom. As a recent commentary on *Seminar VIII* underlines: 'Even though Pausanias' higher love is based on a meritocracy — one in which it is ignoble to love someone for their money — it is still founded on an exchange at the level of profit.'²¹ Supply and demand, then, as the sign of a certain social election, a careful investment in a set of imaginary goods.

Pausanias, in other words, is a prudent financial advisor in the field of love, and it is as such that Lacan suggests that it is the ludicrous sophistry of his speech that has inspired Aristophanes to such uncontrollable laughter that it leads to the hiccups that prevent the latter from speaking in his own proper turn. Lacan thereby strenuously repudiates the position that sees Pausanias's position as a distant anticipation of Kantian morals. If Pausanias's disquisition is itself presented within the dialogue as comic, it is not only because its division of kinds is subsequently shown to be at once narrowly partisan and conceptually unsustainable, self-serving, and sententious — Lacan notes that several years after the time of the dialogue Pausanias elopes to Macedonia with Agathon! — but because it is undermined by the economics of its own putative virtue.

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20 Lacan 2017, p. **.

21 Swales 2020, p. 45. See also Fink 2016, p. 170.

However funny one might find Pausanias's efforts, it is the distinction that he makes between the Pandemical and the Uranian that re-emerges in the treatises of Harvey, Rogers, and others (who often directly cite Plato²²), if in an unutterably different context. If Lacan's drawing a link between Pausanias and a contemporary French Calvinist as exemplifying a rich man's ideology may seem a long bow, it certainly speaks to something desperately urgent for the English Puritans. 'Pandemic' can now modify both 'government' and 'sickness' equally. And as we have suggested, the *pandemical* is itself on the way to becoming *pandemic*, a substantive: in doing so, it no longer modifies a becoming but prefigures an actuality. That paradoxical actuality is the self-dissolving uproar of a community whose unity and equality are merely numerical and topical, not bound according to reason's light but to pure aggregation in a place. The *pan* of the *demos* marks the *atopia* and *chaos* of *hedone*.

But this deadlock is also precisely why the theologico-politico-medical polemics of the mid-17th century found it impossible to construct and maintain an idea of polity that did not fall back into ochlocracy or tyranny. When Cromwell died, nobody could present a better model for the transmission of power than blood inheritance itself; Oliver's own son Richard briefly becomes Lord Protector before the English call back the very son of the king they tried and executed to revivify the institution of monarchy they had so radically abolished. And the deadlock achieves its apotheosis barely a few decades later in the Glorious Revolution of 1688/9, where William and Mary sail over from the Netherlands to share the throne in the bizarre English parliamentary monarchy that has subsisted to our day.

We have mentioned that it is difficult in English to say *pandemic* without hearing the *panic* that is literally in it. Difficult today, it would have been nearly impossible in a 17th-century England in which the word *panic* — in all its orthographic variations, such as *panique*, *panick*, *pannicke*, and so on — was a staple of political discourse. Once again, a pun may be involved, for instance, in *panic seed* and *panic grass*, from the Latin *panicum* for a kind of grain: give us this day our daily bread. *Panic* qua fear had entered English via French by the 16th century — it is a word used by Rabelais — and was preponderantly used adjectivally, for example, as 'panic fear,' to designate a sudden and unreasoning terror (although it too seems to have been used, rarely, as a noun).²³

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22 See for instance the extraordinary little tract *Erotomania*, in which the author remarks 'But we are to observe with Pausanias, that as there are two Veneres: the one Heavenly, called Urania, the daughter of Coelum, brought forth without a Mother: the other the daughter of Iupiter and Dione, commonly called Pandemia, or Vulgar: so likewise are there two Amores, Sonnes of these two Goddesses; the one Divine, and the other common and vulgar,' Ferrand 1640, p. 3. See also Evelyn 1656, p. 99.

This standard use is precisely the target of Thomas Hobbes's correction in Chapter VI of *Leviathan*, 'Of the Interiour Beginnings of Voluntary Motions; Commonly Called the Passions. And the Speeches By Which They Are Expressed,' in which he remarks:

Feare, without the apprehension of why, or what, Panique Terror; called so from the Fables, that make *Pan* the author of them; whereas in truth, there is alwayes in him that so feareth, first, some apprehension of the cause, though the rest run away by Example; every one supposing his fellow to know why. And therefore this Passion happens to none but in a throng, or multitude of people.²⁴

Hobbes's correction or rather specification directly brings out the paradoxes of *knowing* at stake in panic: although one does not know why the other is panicking, one supposes that the other knows; panic depends on a subject supposed to know. And although it is a sudden reaction on the part of the individual to another individual's actions, the passion itself is distributed across a multitude that comes into existence as its own dispersal. This specification proves absolute for Hobbes. In the state of nature, an endless war in which life is nasty, brutish, and short, such panic terror makes no sense; one flees because another is approaching you; one in fact rationally flees, knowing that the other appears only to assault you. Neither multitude nor non-knowing is at stake. Panic fear can only take place amongst a constituted multitude: one flees because the other flees because one presumes the other knows something one doesn't.



23 There are literally hundreds of surviving pamphlets from the 1640s and 1650s, the time of the civil wars in England, in which the phrase appears in free variation: 'pannick fear,' 'panick Fear,' 'Panique terrours,' 'pannicke fear,' 'panicke feare,' etc. If Trevian 2015 emphasizes that in contemporary English, *panic* is one of the few nouns and verbs in *-ic* that *isn't* today adjectival, it certainly was in the 17th century.

24 Hobbes 2004, p. 36. Pan is mentioned once again in the section 'Of Religion,' where ancient humans invented spirits in nature: 'they filled almost all places, with spirits called *Daemons*: the plains, with *Pan*, and *Panises*, or Satyres; the Woods, with *Fawnes*, and *Nymphs*...', p. 80.

In a recent commentary on the famous frontispiece that guards the entryway to the *Leviathan* — that of the great crowned composite figure wielding a sword and a crook over a near-emptied city, while images of the engines of war and ideology take their place below, on either side of the knotted and tasselled curtain on which the title and author's name are embroidered — Giorgio Agamben picks up on a number of enigmatic details. Why is the colossus depicted as outside the city? Where does the figure stand in relation to the other elements of the image? Why is the city itself empty, excepting several tiny figures?

Agamben proceeds to suggest that the extraterritorial aspect of the figure designates the separation between the political and physical bodies of the city; the recomposition of the scale of its hidden body (on Vitruvian principles by Reinhard Brandt) implies that its feet 'float' somewhere behind the name of Thomas Hobbes himself, indicating the pertinence of the Schmittian geopolitical opposition of land and sea²⁵; that this composite body is imaginary (an optical illusion), not real; that it indicates a division between the multitude of *citizens* and the *people* as such; that the only visible creatures remaining in the city are armed guards and the two figures that bear 'the characteristic beaked mask of plague doctors'²⁶; that, following his own translation of Thucydides, Hobbes is recalling the plague of Athens. 'Hence the notion,' Agamben writes, 'that the *dissoluta multitudo*, which inhabits the city under the Leviathan's dominion, may be compared to the mass of plague victims, who must be cared for and governed.'²⁷ Following this insight, Agamben offers the term *ademia*, the absence of people, as the perennial condition of the state form as such.

Our own analysis suggests that, rather than *ademia* — a construction which appears nowhere in the period — *pandemia* would be a better term for what Hobbes is presenting. The streets of the city have indeed been emptied due to a plague, but it is a pandemic plague

25 For the most part, the interpretations of the figure (including Agamben's) fail to interrogate the sex of the figure, silently assuming that it is indeed a 'masculine' sovereign, composed either of synecdochally masculine bodies or some kind of mixture. This presumption, however, has precisely been interrogated by Janice Richardson, who in addition to an analysis of many recent accounts (including the intriguing Schmittian-inspired suggestion that, rather than comprising a human figure, what is concealed is that the figure in fact bears a fish's tail), invokes the legal doctrine of *persona covert* and proposes 'the frontispiece portrays the secularisation of another birth fantasy; that of Adam giving birth to Eve,' p. 69. Further along these lines, then, one might ask whether all the little bodies are in fact those of *adults*. In a private communication, Marion J. Campbell has suggested that the stage curtain itself covers what any psychoanalyst should expect: *nothing*, an empty and in-existent stage. The veiled open secret is that Leviathan is castrated, and Hobbes is literally covering for him.

26 Agamben 2015, p. 38. Agamben credits Horst Bredekamp for noticing the detail, but Francesca Falk for its first proper discussion, see Falk 2011. It is surely significant that recent 'pandemic philosophy' has enthusiastically returned to the plague aspects of the image, see e.g., Botting 2020, Poole 2020, Toscano 2020, in the wake of Falk's discussion.

27 Agamben 2015, p. 38.

of the paramount political affect that is *panic terror*. The *urbs* suffers a constitutional *morbis*; much like Hobbes says of himself, the city and panic were also born prematurely as twins. If this account is correct, then we can further confirm that by the 1660s the medical, politico-theological and philosophical histories of *pandemic* and *panic* are more generally in the course of their nominalization and integration. Not unexpectedly, then, this also becomes the moment and trigger for a radical revision of the homonymy by means of a poetic neologism.

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The first edition of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* appeared in 1667 in 10 books; the now-canonical 12-book version in 1674, just before Milton's death. If Milton — whose survival following the Restoration of 1660 was anything but assured — had previously published a volume of his poetry in 1645, he remained most notorious as a regicide, as the man who had penned *the* defences and justifications for the execution of Charles I. Still, *Paradise Lost* was an immediate hit. As is well known, the poem's action begins in appropriate epic tradition *in medias res*, with the devils awakening in the abyss of hell, discoursing of the causes and consequences of their diminished state, before setting about building themselves a palace. Mammon digs out the gold; Mulciber is the architect; Satan is underneath the lot:

Anon out of the earth a Fabrick huge
Rose like an Exhalation, with the sound
Of Dulcet Symphonies and voices sweet,
Built like a Temple, where *Pilasters* round
Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
With Golden Architrave; nor did there want
Cornice or Freeze, with bossy Sculptures grav'n,
The Roof was fretted Gold. Not *Babilon*,
Nor great *Alcairo* such magnificence
Equal'd in all thir glories.[...].
Meanwhile the winged Heralds by command
Of Sovran power, with awful Ceremony
And Trumpets sound throughout the Host
A solemn Councel forthwith to be held
As *Pandaemonium*, the high Capital
Of Satan and his Peers...²⁸

This name appears twice in the poem proper. In Book IX, Pandaemonium is again invoked as 'Pandaemonium, Citie and proud seate/Of Lucifer,

28 Milton 1667, 1.710-719, 1.752-757.

so by allusion calld,/Of that bright Starr to Satan paragond' (9 424-6). It is now a staple of commentary that Pandaemonium is modelled on St Peter's in Rome, and that its auxiliary images further emphasize the devilish Papal allusions; for instance, Urban VIII's personal insignia was a bee.²⁹ We could also emphasize the moral and material significance of the mining that founds the city.³⁰ The name *Pandaemonium* is modelled on *pantheon*, literally a place of and for *all demons*; it is first and foremost a toponym. The subsequent senses of wild uproar and Babelian confusion — if certainly at play in certain images of the devils and their spiritual progeny throughout the poem — are nonetheless not paramount in Milton's descriptions, which, at least initially, quite deliberately appear to have an impressive organisation and orderliness, propriety and property, much like the city on the *Leviathan* frontispiece.

Certainly, the prefix *pan* is emphasized. The mythic Pan and Pandora both feature in the poem. Pan appears in the description of Paradise itself as 'Universal Pan/Knit with the Graces and the Hours in dance/Led on th'Eternal Spring' (4.266-268), and again in the description of Adam and Eve's bower: 'In shadier Bower/More sacred and sequesterd, though but feignd,/Pan or Silvanus never slept, nor Nymph/Nor Faunus haunted.' (4.705-7). Pandora follows rapidly after, diminished in comparison to Eve: 'More lovely then Pandora, whom the Gods/Endowd with all thir gifts' (4.714-715). These metaphors are not only bravura scene-setting indices of Milton's learning, allusions to a great classical tradition of pastoral and didactic poetry; they also evince two techniques that he characteristically deploys together. The first is his propensity to adjectival explication of proper names to the point of semantic redundancy — which might be considered Leibnizian if Leibniz were not already unconsciously Miltonic — such that Pan is introduced as 'Universal' or Pandora as 'endowed with all thir gifts.' The second is his radicalization of negation, such that the classical myths are not invoked simply as paradigms, but paradigms that, however magnificent, necessarily fail in comparison to the Biblical figures.

Despite all the *pans* that proliferate within the poem, neither *panic* nor *pandemic* appears there. Yet the use of either or both would be easily imaginable, given the scenes of the devils' rout by Messiah in heaven, or in the historical vignettes of the late books. Moreover, given Milton's intimate knowledge of the political discourses of the 1640s and 1650s, and not least his apparent fondness for some aspects of the Fifth Monarchist platform³¹, he could not have been unaware of the importance of panic

29 See *inter alia* McHenry 1995; Simons 1987.

30 See Clemens 2013 for an account of the links Milton makes between mining, slavery, and ecological destruction.

31 See Hill 2016, p. 68.

to, say, the proposals of Thomas Hobbes.³² So is it mere homophony or alliteration that induces our invocation of Milton's pandaemonium in an essay on pandemic?³³

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As noted, when it does appear in 17th century discourses, *pandemic* and its variants are explicitly referred to Pausanias's separation of the two kinds of love in the *Symposium*. Presumably due to the context of disease, we do not hear so much about Uranian or Uranick love in such accounts.³⁴ But 'Urania,' the proper name of the muse of Astronomy, appears very frequently in the period, in mathematical, astronomical and astrological texts, and indeed in poetry. One work from 1629 by Samuel Austin even contains a couplet signed by Austin's Muse, Urania herself, to the book's readers: 'You that are troubled with the Dog-disease,/Pray reade me o're; then censure what you please./Vrania.'³⁵ Examples could be multiplied. As for Milton, his invocation of Urania in the proem to Book VII is among the most famous sequences in all English poetry:

Descend from Heav'n *Urania*, by that name
If rightly thou art call'd, whose Voice divine
Following, above *th'Olympian* Hill I soare,
Above the flight of *Pegasean* wing.
The meaning, not the Name I call: for thou
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
Of old *Olympus* dwell'st, but Heav'nlie borne,
Before the Hills appeerd, or Fountain flow'd,

.....
32 There are two mentions of the Leviathan by name in *Paradise Lost*, which may or may not also be alluding to Hobbes' great text. But there are also other images that can look like pointed if esoteric jokes at Hobbes' expense if one takes the fishy interpretations of the *Leviathan* frontispiece seriously; for instance, there is this image from the catalogue of devils in Book 1: 'Next came one/Who mourn'd in earnest, when the Captive Ark/Maim'd his brute Image, head and hands lopt off/In his own Temple, on the grunsel edge,/Where he fell flat, and sham'd his Worshipers: Dagon his Name, Sea Monster, upward Man/And downward Fish,' (1.457-463).

33 The theologian Catherine Keller (2020) has recently picked up on the homophony, but without further investigating the philological network of these terms, i.e., 'Pandemic and pandemonium — was it mere alliteration insistently linking those two words in my head? They seem disconnected: the pandemic has spread eerie silence and ordered separation far more than the pandemonium of wild and noisy disorder. Then I remembered the original meaning of pandemonium "all the demons." Ah. That's it. What a host of demons the pandemic has been revealing: not supernatural spooks but hellish systems of collective oppression, of normalised injustice — normally hidden, like all smart demons, in plain view.'

34 We could find no references to the form 'Uranic' at all *before* 1680, when it starts to fitfully appear; and only three to 'Uranian,' perhaps the most pertinent in this context being to Cyril Tourneur's *The Transformed Metamorphosis* of 1600, in which he writes: 'He bent his mind to pure Vranian vses,/Vranianie, him did to heau'n vpreare,' n.p.

35 Austin 1629, np. One might also refer to *The Countesse of Mountgomerie's Urania*, the first known prose romance written by an English woman, Lady Mary Wroth in 1621.

Thou with Eternal wisdom didst converse,
Wisdom thy Sister, and with her didst play.
In presence of th'Almightie Father, pleas'd
With thy Celestial Song (7.1-12)

So, whatever else it may mean, Urania goes in completely the opposite direction from Pandaemonium. Milton is directly alluding to the Pausanian division between two kinds of love, but gives it a twist; it can no longer be a true division.³⁶ For the heterodox Christian messianist Milton, there cannot be two kinds of love, only one. What seeks to separate and mingle promiscuously is demonic: so *pandaemonium* absorbs its adjectival antecedents *pandemic* and *panic* into a new proper name that simultaneously crystallizes their truth. In doing so, it drags us inexorably downwards: *facilis descensus Averno*, in Virgil's famous phrase. How then does one escape Pandaemonium in the fallen world, as the literal capital and place-holder of every human act? By the grace of God, of course. For Milton, this grace is given an ancient catachrestic name for a hazardous cosmic media event: Urania.

As I have noted, with other proper names of varying provenance Milton tends to explicate their sense and reference as continuous with, as enfolded within the name. Where Urania is concerned, he does something quite different. The name is a place-holder for something properly nameless, a Christian muse never named by the Bible, so much *of* the heavens that she cannot be seen by mortal sight: she speaks only to a blind man of things he then recites to be transcribed by others.³⁷ In governing his song, Milton hopes that she will 'drive farr off the barbarous dissonance of *Bacchus* and his Revellers' who destroyed Orpheus — themselves self-evidently figures that express and participate in pandaemonium. Milton's revolutionary nominations absorb a sequence of philological and political operations upon the *pan*, the *demos*, and the *demonic*, in order to oppose them to the insubstantial operation of poetic grace. The political aporia of the English *pan* is brilliantly resolved and sublimated — except, sadly, not as politics but as poetry.

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It would certainly be possible to trace this network forward, for example as it re-emerges in the work of Sigmund Freud, where *Panik* arises in a group when the leader is destroyed.³⁸ As an anonymous review in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* brilliantly phrases it: 'When these

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36 See Samuel 1944 for a chronological table of Milton's citations of Plato, which tracks his explicit references to the dialogues, including the *Symposium*.

37 See Clemens 2012 for an account of the relationship between Milton and Galileo in *Paradise Lost*, whereby Milton seeks to trump Galileo's telescope with his muse Urania.

38 See Freud 1955, p. 96.

mutual bonds (which all depend on the great bond with the leader) break, then we have libido with the negative prefix — the stricken terror of panic.³⁹ As Freud underlines in a Hobbesian vein, in such panic the effect seems to be much greater than the cause. And in their own commentary on Freud's politics, in a presentation titled precisely '*La panique politique*,' Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy remark that: 'panic is the best and paradoxical representative of the essence of the *Masse*: It is the critical moment when, the affective bond having gradually been lost, the *Masse* breaks up into what really composes it, into narcissi which are estranged and opposed to each other.' Hence: 'The narcissus and the death of "the Other" are the panic truth of the political... which only assembles that which, by itself, disassembles and excludes itself.'⁴⁰ Panic is therefore an apocalypse of the political, insofar as it reveals precisely the absence of the All-Father, the Pan in the field of narcissi.

This essay has attempted a kind of logological reconstruction of certain decisive shifts in a network of crucial medical, moral, political and poetic signifiers in mid-17th century England, whereby literal fragments such as *pan*, *con*, *all*, *ic*, among others, are transformed and reconnected along quite novel pathways. The brief mapping of the vicissitudes of these pathways here has suggested, among other things, that *pandemic*, *panic*, and *pandaemonium* became key operators of a 'political unconscious' of the English language in the 17th century and, to some extent, have remained so ever since. It is no surprise, then, that another favourite word of the period proves to be *panacea*, a cure-all, whether it came, by century's end to mean tea, tobacco, opium, the blood of Christ, or some other confection.⁴¹ Another very ancient word, a panacea is a *pharmakon*, an assay at a technopolitical solution for a morbidity that strikes at the whole. Still, as Leonard Cohen puts it, 'there ain't no cure for love.'

In the short self-critique that is 'Back and Forth from Letter to Homophony,' Jean-Claude Milner points to a passage of Lacan's presentation *La Troisième*, first delivered in Rome in 1975, in which the psychoanalyst proffers a critique of Saussure's nomination of the 'arbitrariness of the sign' in the name of the homophony of *lalangue*. 'It is neither pure chance nor arbitrariness, as Saussure says,' says Lacan, 'It is the deposit, the alluvium, the petrification [...] of the handling by a group of its own unconscious experience.'⁴² What does this mean? Homophony, Milner glosses:

39 Anon 1923, p. 188.

40 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997, p. 10.

41 There are an extraordinary number and variety of texts spruiking an equally extraordinary number and variety of panaceas throughout the century and, again, which propose themselves as simultaneously physiological, sexual, political, etc.

42 Cited Milner 2017, p. 82.

is not an addition to the various dimensions of language; it is not an ornamental superstructure that does not modify the foundations of the building. On the contrary, it transforms radically everything that can be theorized about the Unconscious and its relationship to the fact of *lalangue*.⁴³

Milner notes that his own resistance to such late statements by Lacan was a resistance to homophony: 'the material of *lalangue* is homophony, but homophony does not belong to *la langue*.'⁴⁴ Why is the material of *lalangue* homophony? Precisely because the same material — which is not yet a signifier *stricto sensu*, but a mark (whether aural, visual or other) which is in course of becoming-individuated in the perceptual field insofar as it is also becoming-bound to *jouissance* — draws in many different directions at once. But this is also why '*lalangue* is not a whole, it is *pastout* [notall]. There is no x that does not belong to *lalangue*, while there is an x at least that does not belong to *la langue*.'⁴⁵ Homophony precisely does not form an all or whole, a *pan*, because its subtraction from the (imaginary) 'whole' of *la langue* arises only insofar as it is entirely submerged in the latter. Yet nothing in *la langue* can be in principle excepted from homophony; the former is literally built on it. Moreover, homophony *effects* itself insofar as it cannot not recur in any situation of language, if in ways that are necessarily equivocal and literally unspeakable, as kind of enigma-event. Yet this is what links Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's remarks to Milner's: homophony qua material of *lalangue* is not only a *jouissance*-saturated enigma, but an event of *langue-panic* or *-pandemic* as such.

I would like to draw further on Milner's remarks in proposing the paradoxical concept of *synonymy*: an intra-linguistic event that, through a kind of internal short-circuiting of language, enables a kind of discrimination of indiscernibles through a binding of disparities that opens up new semantic possibilities, including the creation of new signifiers.⁴⁶ What seems to be self-identical significatory matter — at once homophonic and synonymous — turns out in fact to be a compacted heterogeneity, a constellation of black holes. So the phrase *morbus anglicus* starts to connect to *pan*, to *panic*, to *pandemic*, to *pandaemonium*, to *panacea* — as it itself vanishes into irrelevance. Yet it thereby leaves its residues in canonical political theories and practices of public safety,

43 Milner 2017, p. 85.

44 Milner 2017, p. 85.

45 Milner 2017, p. 89.

46 See Clemens 2015 for (comic) diagrams and (more serious) references. See also Ford 2018 pp. 205-215 for a brilliant demonstration of synonymy's operations in the difference between 'O' and 'Oh!' in William Wordsworth's poetry.

of biopolitics, in the divided figure of the absent and infected people.⁴⁷ Finally, it also induces the revolutionary restoration of an ancient signifier, *Urania*, that needs to be enunciated as the index of a breach with the *pan*, but whose meaning is other than any received signification — a movement of the immanent outside, neither one nor many, an other *jouissance*.

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47To give only one, relatively recent example: ‘On May 21, 2009, WHO’s Director-General, Margaret Chan decided that influenza A (H1N1) was not going to become a pandemic. Not because of any epidemiological rationale but because the very term “pandemic” was feared to trigger global panic,’ Gilman 2010, p. 1866.

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Volume 7
Issue 3

The Accomplice

Alexander García Düttmann

Abstract: The refusal to take part in the race for the most convincing, the most incisive, the most original, perhaps even the most outrageous discourse about the relevance and the impact of the Corona-pandemic must not be confused with a refusal to analyse this race itself and the discourses that constitute it. In the end, it may well turn out that what distinguishes one refusal from the other is an astonished laughter.

Keywords: events, astonished laughter

When, a month ago, I was asked to write a short piece about the current pandemic, I recommended an astonished laughter in the face of the interminable parade of all who seem to know what the pandemic is all about. They seem to have ready-made answers and are more than willing to provide them in public spaces. My friend Jean-Luc Nancy, who very kindly encouraged me to videotape a French translation of my piece, and who very generously produced a draft of the translation and suggested a few clarifications, was not, I believe, very much taken with what I had written. Why is the rush to produce global explanations so surprising, he asked me, if the pandemic, fitting so well into the world in which we live now, must be considered something that, knowingly or unknowingly, had been expected or awaited? To which I replied that such was the effect of all events. They cannot be foreseen and yet, once they take place, they appear to be utterly familiar, making everything they have transformed strangely recognisable – unless the alleged recognisability is the result of a denial of the event. My reply did not quite convince him. Perhaps he doubted that there was something truly eventful about the pandemic. Perhaps he thought that the pandemic was less an intriguing beginning than the massive confirmation and conclusion of previous developments – in which case I should have insisted and asked him whether he would not be willing to concede that if the spreading of the virus across the world seems to have brought matters into focus, this was not in itself an indication of something truly eventful, as if an event, to be or to operate as an event, had to keep happening again and again without for that matter becoming any more predictable. Of course an event “is” not and does not “operate”.

I would like to add a few remarks to Nancy’s idea of the pandemic having been largely anticipated, in more or less obscure or subterranean ways – an anticipation which I take to be inseparable from the strange retroactive recognisability that an event must trigger. It must trigger this recognisability so as to affect us, inescapably and unassailably, rather than vanish unnoticed.

My first remark is neither here nor there. The anticipation that cannot be distinguished from a confirmation and that may not even precede it is a straight and hence a conservative affair. No wonder all

the straight boys and girls who meddle with theory of whatever kind and want to prove how grown-up they are, or how much they belong, cannot get enough of the pandemic, though the straightest of the gang of exciting contemporary philosophers has chosen to withdraw into the rationalism of science and reflect upon the means to unleash and organise a revolutionary change. When the last pandemic held sway over Western countries and threw them and the rest of the world into the so-called AIDS crisis – can a title get straighter than “Crisis and Critique”? – it was not queer people who had been watching out for it but those who were not much stunned because, in their eyes, the prevailing libertarian and licentious forms of life had the impending disease written all over them. Faggots and druggies deserved no better, it was assumed. It is true that queer people who then contributed to the elaboration of the pandemic's theory often ended up outstripping the conservatism of their adversaries. Conservatives are the ones who saw it coming, or who after the fact behave as if they had seen it coming. The virus that circulates in a pandemic turns into an accomplice of straightness and conservatism, the safe alternatives that preclude surprises.

My second remark is pro domo in nature. For I am startled by the fact that universities and especially art schools are so well behaved under the circumstances created by the pandemic and the measures devised to fight it, the sanctions imposed upon a majority of countries and their populations. Instead of engaging in radical social critique, they are content with reproducing bland social therapy discourses, discourses about pain and anxiety, while accepting and praising the creative virtues of digital communication and expecting online teaching to prove much more than a poor surrogate. Are not things digital, formal, and immaterial as they are, inherently safe, capable of being controlled, at least in principle? Are they not clean, as clean as the invisible virus itself that makes such a mess? Here, the remnants of the jargon of authenticity, relational aesthetics, and technology's streamlined advances all meet to bring about the required conformism. The virus that circulates in a pandemic turns into an accomplice of state-of-the-art technology and the ideological justifications of its uses.

My third and last remark can be put just as simply. The virus that circulates in a pandemic turns into an accomplice of purism and puritanism. For who was more eager to see the virus proliferate than the many new purists and puritans who, in the past twenty-five years or so, have set about regulating everyday life and intercourse as thoroughly as possible, achieving an unprecedented juridification, which is designed to troubleshoot social relations, plug up openness, extend a safety net where exposure is unavoidable and eliminate every trace of filth, ambiguity, exaggeration, incoherence, one-sidedness, confusion, violence? Demonstrations against the shutdown and its handling, such as the ones that occur in the immediate vicinity of Berlin's Volksbühne, are

denounced as indiscriminate and misguided, as attracting loonies who propagate conspiracy theories and both leftwing and rightwing extremists and malcontents. A “famous philosopher”, as a less prominent colleague calls him in a conservative Swiss newspaper, is brushed off for stating that the epidemic is an invention and for describing its consequences in too negative – or “critical”? – a fashion, thus ignoring all the new manifestations of solidarity and social cohesion and protection.

As I am writing this second piece on the pandemic, I am browsing through *Un jeune homme chic*, or, in English, *A Smart Young Man*, a book by Alain Pacadis, whose articles I used to read in *Libération* when I arrived in Paris in the mid-eighties. At one point, having travelled to New York in October of 1976 and having met up with punk singer Elodie, he has a conversation with her in her downtown flat. Elodie, who has been living in the city for a while now and feels at home there, mentions three things that are important to her and her people, namely the ability to “do without”, esoteric practices, and the collective sharing of ideas, which she calls “waves”, “streams”, or “flows”. Does not the heterogeneity and the incongruity of such an assemblage, the unlikeliness of such a gathering or of such a constellation, from which something no less unlikely may spring forward, defy the obedient uniformity that the virulence of a virus appears to support?

When, in a live broadcast on Instagram, Jean-Luc Godard highlights the importance of situating the virus in the context of the carrying and imparting of information – a host is required for transmission, or contamination, to come about – he is alerting us to the fact that, to communicate, or to acquire visibility and make an impact, it is not enough for the virus to cause a high number of deaths. Must it not also turn into an accomplice of hegemonic propensities, currents and movements in a given society, or in a globalised world?

What I have tried to do with my remarks is identify three such propensities, three scenarios of anticipation and confirmation. The virus, it appears, was with us before it started its rapid expansion and ascent into the limelight of generalised attention. Hence, to remind ourselves that this expansion is also perhaps something truly eventful, something all the more recognisable as it cannot be fully accounted for, or better still: something of which we cannot say how eventful it may be, is to recall that those propensities and scenarios have a limited scope, that they are not all there is. The virus is not merely an accomplice.

25th April 2020

On April 28th, 2020, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published a conversation with sixty-eight-year old theatre director Frank Castorf about the pandemic. His is a voice that refuses to stifle dissent. Stifle dissent is what the State and its supporters, the population it is meant to protect, must do. They must do so in a situation in which self-preservation itself is said to be at stake – the self-preservation of the social order that the State ensures, the self-preservation of the State and, most importantly but perhaps not primarily, the self-preservation of the State's population.

Here are a few points Castorf makes in his conversation. He maintains that the pandemic has turned into a smoke screen and that this can be gauged from the fact that every piece of news, every article or discussion, is introduced by the stock phrase “In times of Corona...” The smoke screen dissimulates the urgency of issues such as social inequality and hardship, global climate change, warfare and migration on a vast scale. A further point Castorf makes is that we live in a world that deems itself immortal and that for this reason aspires to preserve life at any cost. When Castorf says that he is not willing to be rescued, to have his life saved, he wants to stress that there may be something more valuable than mere life and that to defend the worth of what cannot be reduced to it may be more important than staying alive. Could the cost of staying alive not be such that we lose sight of what has greater worth, perhaps art itself and other forms of thought? Do we actually want to live in a post-pandemic world, or in a “new normality”, if self-preservation becomes the main preoccupation of the survivors, especially of the less fortunate amongst them? Objecting that the possibility of valuing something more than self-preservation presupposes conditions that secure self-preservation in the first place is just as simple-minded a rejoinder as the objection that in order to ask critical questions about truth one must make a claim to it if one does not want to get entangled in a performative self-contradiction.

Castorf also observes that “in times of Corona” unfriendliness and unkindliness have become pervasive in public life. People control each other nervously and anxiously. They monitor so-called irresponsible behaviour, as if ensuring compliance with the inflicted rules of social distancing had acquired an authoritarian aspect, independent of the protective function attributed to these rules. Castorf mentions an actor who is not allowed to visit his severely disabled parents, points out that taking leave from terminally-ill friends and relatives is no longer possible and stresses the emotional and mental consequences of keeping elderly people, who form a “risk group”, at bay. He states that Germans, who have so obediently accepted the curtailing of basic individual rights, appear to long for someone who takes them by the hand and gives them guidance. What others interpret as signs of solidarity, he stigmatises

as a symptom of conformism. This is why he is not prepared to have the German chancellor tell him – with a “whiney face” – that he must wash his hands regularly. He refuses to be treated like a child by someone who assumes the role of a concerned parent. How easily can the limit between reasonable and intimidated – and intimidating – behaviour be drawn? This question seems all the more pressing the more one keeps in mind that Adorno and Horkheimer, philosophers from the tradition of Critical Theory, have linked the genesis of rationality to the aims, needs, and ruses of self-preservation.

When I suggested that the conversation with Castorf should be placed on the homepage of the institution at which I teach, a renowned art school in Germany, I was met with silence and also hostility from a number of colleagues. They took my proposal to be overtly provocative. This was less astounding than the fact that they all felt they had to justify their rebuff by sending me detailed counterarguments to Castorf's assertions. Although Castorf does refer to statistics and speculates about alternative strategies pursued by governments in other European countries, although he appeals to civil rights and an alleged “Western normality”, thus creating the semblance of entering an exchange of arguments, it is rather obvious that his confrontational remarks, or his rant, do not invite refutation in a shared argumentative discourse. The rant is a gesture of defiance and resistance, a challenge from someone who, as a theatre director, or as an artist, advocates his readiness to reflect upon “what happens outside”. How come fellow artists and art theorists were not sensible to this difference and ignored it altogether? Does not showing good will by engaging fiercely in a discussion and exchanging arguments sometimes amount to a warding-off tactic? I chose not to exacerbate passions – his detractors often charge Castorf with adopting a self-absorbed he-man attitude and cultivating irritating harassment for the sake of doing so – and remembered the “sly style of civil disobedience” ascribed to Andy Warhol in Koestenbaum's biography of the artist: “When confronted with authority, go limp.”

A friend in another country, to whom I had sent the conversation with the heading “This is ‘my’ Germany”, qualified Castorf's comments as downright repugnant, adding that clearly one can be a great theatre director and at the same time an idiot. To this I took exception. I told my friend that by separating the artist from his political existence in such a manner, he relinquished artistic achievements to culture, which is always informed by a deep resentment against thought, whether it appears in the guise of art or in some other guise. Perhaps the widespread assumption that one can be a great artist or philosopher while remaining, and mysteriously so, a reckless political fool, an assumption I have underwritten myself in the past, is merely a prejudice, a convenient compartmentalisation aimed at preventing further and unsettling inquiry. Heidegger may be a case in point here. There is no doubting that he was

a Nazi, I believe, yet his active backing of National Socialism was also the result of an insight into the insufficiency of confining philosophy to its academic layout. When Foucault, who had been reticent toward May 68, backed the Iranian insurrection against the Shah and US imperialism, he did it out of the same insight, regardless of the gamble involved.

What the reactions to the conversation with Castorf put into evidence is that the more a uniformity of behaviour and thought is established to face the pandemic that the virus unleashes, the more dissenting voices must be heard and the more the disruption they trigger must be welcomed, at once reluctantly and enthusiastically. Such voices seem to be accomplices of the virus when in truth they admonish us of the fact that uniformity is never innocent, no matter what purpose it may serve, and that the pandemic highlights the tensions to which we have no choice but to expose ourselves if we are to withstand authoritarianism. An unruly and intractable remainder of unreasonableness that defies justification and sensible comportment, and that is the trace of an “outside”, cannot and should not be evacuated. There is always a point at which artists and philosophers, or whoever cares for thought and ideas, must stop talking to the ones whose chosen task is to watch over self-preservation, a point at which they have nothing to say to each other anymore, or at which their relationship ceases to have the form of an argumentative exchange, if it ever had such a form. The real accomplices are the ones who quicken the erosion of what they pretend to defend, democracy, by making it a safe place.

4th May 2020

The concept of “conspiracy theory” is a key concept when denouncing those who come out as opponents of the curtailing of basic civil rights that the government defends as unavoidable and, given the circumstances, reasonable. Supporting “conspiracy theories” is seen as equivalent to behaving like a loony. It is well known that times of crisis generate not only insecurity but also insanity. Yet at what point, exactly, can the support given to what is labeled a “conspiracy theory” be interpreted as a sign of unreasonableness and, in turn, the sign of unreasonableness interpreted as a symptom of insanity that calls for special treatment? Does insanity belong to the very definition of conspiracy theories, and are the ones who underwrite them all accomplices, members of a gang of loonies who have contaminated each other and are a possible threat to others as well? In a pandemic, the virus produces such gangs, perhaps even in the guise of mass movements, and reproduces itself as a contaminating idea.

I remember a Wittgensteinian argument put forward by moral philosopher Raimond Gaita in a discussion about reasonable and unreasonable doubts. Doubts prove to be unreasonable, if not outright irrational, when they target the most fundamental beliefs by which we live, or the established practices without which there would be no such thing as a meaningful life. For if one does not stop doubting, the ability to make distinctions is paralysed and life itself becomes unlivable. The example Gaita provides, as far as I can remember, is the example of someone who has doubts about the ingestion of meals served in restaurants because he fears that the waiter will poison him. This is where we must draw the line, according to the moral philosopher. Asking for an argument here, a justification, signals an aberration of the mind.

If it does not seem too outrageous to claim that the world of power is a world in which intrigues, plots and schemes, conniving, trickery, and machination reign supreme, both overtly and hidden from the surface, and that the strategies pursued to gain, maintain, and usurp power are not necessarily rational ones, why would it be insane to grant the possibility of the pandemic being part of a globally relevant conspiracy? It is not so much the mere conviction of conspirational activities on a large, or fundamental, scale and the concomitant refusal to accept the ways in which the crisis unleashed by Corona is handled, namely as a mere sanitary emergency, that should lead to a rejection of conspiracy theories. Such a rejection, to be sensible, needs to base itself, if at all possible, on the implausibility of the clues collected and exhibited to underpin the conviction. Yet will these clues be plausible or implausible irrespective of the theory itself?

A rejection of conspiracy theories should never lose sight of the moment of truth that inheres in them, whether they appear to be insane or not, or whether they are disseminated by one form of political extremism or the other. The difficulty lies in that the sphere of power is one in which the distinction between the plausible and the implausible is constantly blurred. It keeps fostering the moment of truth of conspiracy theories to the extent that it makes it more and more strenuous to disentangle the plausible from the implausible. This affects the grounds – the fundamental layer – on which our beliefs can unfold. But if we did not live by a belief that power can be checked and that mechanisms can be activated for such checking; if this belief did itself appear to be unreasonable and insane to the point that the only reasonable thing to do would be to grant the possibility of a worldwide conspiracy, or of power exploiting its arbitrariness violently and without restriction, we would occupy the same position as the skeptic whose doubts never come to an end. Can one draw a line and erase it at the same time?

25th May 2020

And then American youth, unimpressed by the virus and the persisting risk of infection, has taken to the streets throughout the United States, demonstrating peacefully or violently against racism, the police, and the Trump administration. The same is happening in Europe, too, in London, Paris, and Berlin. Must this not stimulate enthusiasm? Who dares to warn against the danger of promoting polarisation and enhancing the American president's chances of winning the upcoming election? Only accomplices of the powers that be.

8th June 2020

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The Twofold Face of Immunity

Roberto Esposito

Abstract: More than ever, today – under the attack of the coronavirus – the immune paradigm has become the keystone of our life system, the pivot around which our entire existence seems to revolve. But the immunitarian systems present a constitutive antinomy: they are at the same time necessary and dangerous for the human community. Beyond a certain threshold, they risk destroying, the very thing that they aim to protect. The problem that we face, even today, is not the simplistic one of contrasting community and immunity, but articulating them in a sustainable form that does not sacrifice one in favour of the other.

Keywords: Community, Immunity, Coronavirus

1. Since the beginning of the pandemic all discussions are exclusively about one thing: immunity. Individual or herd immunity, natural or induced, temporary or definitive. Mass-testing is done to find out if people already gained immunity from the virus. One wonders whether the plasma of those already immune could be injected into the patients, to give them immunity, in their turn. We are waiting to see, in those who heal, how much will last their immunity – fearing that its protective effect could be interrupted. But the request for immunity is not a matter of concern only for the medical sphere. It concerns also the more properly juridical one. Entrepreneurs, school directors, university rectors, they are all looking for an immunising shield, faced with the risks of contagion within their sphere of responsibility. Same could be said for governors, mayors, ministers in charge, who measure the political consequences of a missed, or tardive immunisation.

But there is something more general, invested in all the social sphere as a whole, threatening to transform it into a great immunitary bubble. What else are the lockdowns, the distancing – which only by way of a lexical paradox can be defined as ‘social’ since it produces effects of de-socialisation – if not immunitarian devices that little by little are occupying all the field of individual and collective existence? The little mask up in everybody’s face, isn’t it the metaphor of the exigence for immunity? Even the downloadable app, although not sufficiently downloaded in Italy’s smartphones, is called ‘Immuni’. So, what is it then, where does it come from, where to is leading us this real immunitary syndrome, which seems to unify all the languages of our time?

On a historical level, we must be careful not to reduce the meaning of the concept of immunity to a recent experience, of a medical or legal nature, aimed at creating protective boundaries against a risk. This wouldn’t be wrong, but in order to be grasped in every aspect, it must be framed in a wider and deeper horizon, which should be observed for a longer period. From this perspective, so to say, genealogic, immunity, or immunisation appears as a paradigm through which the entire modern

history could be re-read. Even though life's quest for autoprotection is a characteristic of all the human history, making it possible, it is only in modernity that this comes to be perceived as a fundamental problem, therefore as a strategic task. This happens when, deprived of the theological-natural protections that characterized the premodern period, humans feel the need to build artificial immunity devices to protect themselves from evils, conflicts, and also from the news that threaten or disturb them. What we are facing today is only the last step of this dynamic, ever more intense and more accelerated. In short, what we are witnessing, is an extraordinary change in scale of a process dating back over time

But to understand the phenomenon in all its importance, historical, philosophical, juridical, an even wider tour must be made, that starts from language. If we pay attention to the Latin etymology of the word, moreover, we realize that the meaning of the Latin term *immunitas* is the opposite of that of *communitas* and understandable only in the relationship with it. Both expressions – *communitas* and *immunitas* – derive from the Latin word *munus*, which signifies law, office, obligation, but also gift. What is configured at the center of these meanings is a sort of law of gift, or care, in relation to others. But – here's the difference and the opposition between the two terms – if the community is related to *munus* in a positive sense, the immunity is in a negative sense. While the members of the *communitas* feel bound by this obligation of mutual care, whoever declares himself immune, feels exonerated, exempted from it. He is free from obligations towards others. And therefore, for the same reason, also protected from the risk that each sharing entails with regard to one's personal identity. From this point of view the immunity acquires the meaning of privilege with respect to the rest of the community.

This can be easily recognisable on a legal-political level, in which diplomatic or parliamentary immunity exempts from the obligations of the law to which all others are subject. But also on a medical-biological level, where immunity, be it natural or acquired, original or inducted, protects from the risk of contracting the disease, to which others remain exposed. By superimposing the two semantics, juridical and medical, we can conclude that, while the dimension of the *communitas* determines the rupture of the protection barriers of individual identity, immunity reconstructs them in a defensive and offensive form, against any element – be it external or internal – that threatens its existence. This applies to certain individuals. But at a certain point, this exigency for protection, which is centred around the conservation of life, becomes generalised in all the social body. The State itself, as well as the legal system, is conceived like a great immunization apparatus, against interpersonal conflicts.

The law, in particular, was defined by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann as the immune subsystem of social systems. What does that

mean? That the legal system, however inclusive it may be, always rests on the possibility of exclusion. For someone to be able to perceive that they have a right, they must imagine that they may not have it or that someone else does not. This should not be understood so much from a historical point of view – even though, historically there exists no right, nor even that to life, extended to the entire human race. But from the paradigmatic point of view, which concerns the device of law as such – its logic and its formal language (law, as we know, is always formal and never substantial). If a right would naturally belong to everyone – what the tradition of *ius naturale* defines as 'natural law' – then it would not be a positive right, that is, established by law. It would not be necessary. And, in a certain sense it would not even be, properly speaking, a right, but a simple, self-evident fact. A right, even when it has been recognized, can always be abolished, if the balance of power that guarantees it changes. No right is for ever, even when it is declared unavailable. Let us think of the right of workers, up to a certain point considered inalienable and then, starting from the crisis of the social state, increasingly contracted, reduced, revoked.

I repeat, we must not reduce this contradiction – this antinomy which is part of the *nomos* – to certain events or certain contexts. It is a logical-formal element that pertains to the very structure of law, as indeed to politics. Just as political action presupposes the presence, if not of an enemy, at least of an adversary, an acquired right always presupposes, with respect to those who enjoy it, a zone which is not yet juridical. Otherwise it would coincide with justice. But, as is well known, however much the law may tend towards it, there cannot be an absolutely just law. What the law can do is to reduce the areas of injustice, without presuming to be able to abolish them. This self-critical capacity, this awareness of incompleteness, is decisive for the proper functioning of law. Only by being always aware that it is incomplete, perceiving its own dose of injustice, can law progressively – through a battle over its own meaning – approach justice, become more just. In modern societies, law can be understood as an advancing line, which always goes further, but never to the point of occupying the whole field – otherwise the line that defines it would disappear. Just think of the right of citizenship. In order for some to enjoy a citizenship right, it is necessary logically, but also historically, that some others do not have it, or at least, do not have it yet. Otherwise the expression would lose its very meaning.

2. This brings us back to the constitutively ambivalent character of the immunitarian systems. They are at the same time necessary and dangerous for the human community. They are necessary because no organism, individual or social, would survive without an immune system capable to defend it from dangers of external provenience. They are dangerous because, beyond a certain threshold, they risk blocking, or

even destroying, the very thing that they aim to protect. The problem lies in identifying this threshold – where should it be located? How far can it be moved? Who guards it? What is certain is that the immune system, up to a certain moment only related to the medical and legal fields, at a certain point has been extended to all sectors and languages of our life, to the point of becoming the point of coagulation, real and symbolic, of contemporary experience. At the end of the modern season, this need has become the pivot around which both the actual practice and the imaginary of a certain civilization are built. To get an idea of this, just look at the role that immunology – that is, the science responsible for studying and strengthening immune systems – has taken on in our societies not only under the medical profile, but also under the social, juridical and ethical one.

Just think of what the discovery of the AIDS immunodeficiency syndrome meant in terms of normalization – that is, subjecting individual and collective experience to precise rules, not only hygienic-sanitary. To barriers, which are not only prophylactic, but also socio-cultural, which the nightmare of the disease has imposed in all inter-relational areas. We will find a further confirmation for this, if we move on to the phenomenon of immigration. Everywhere new barriers are emerging, new checkpoints, new lines of separation from something that threatens, or at least appears to threaten, our biological, cultural and social identity. It is as if the fear of being touched, even inadvertently, that Elias Canetti placed at the origin of modernity, in a short circuit between touch, contact and contagion, had become exasperated. The contact, the relationship, the being together is crushed immediately, on the risk of contamination.

The same thing could be said about the risk of viral invasion, that threatens information technologies. By now every government allocates huge sums to defend their computer systems from the infiltration of pathogenic agents. In short, from whichever side you look at what happens – from the individual body, to the social body, to the technological body, to the political body – the question of immunity takes place at the crossroads of all paths.

All this is not extraneous to the dynamics of the ongoing globalization, in the sense that the more human beings, ideas, languages, techniques communicate and intertwine with each other, the more it is generated, as a counter-thrust, a need for preventive immunization. The new sovereignisms can be interpreted as a sort of immunitarian rejection of that general contamination that is globalization. It was precisely the demolition of the great Berlin wall that led to the raising of many small walls, to the point of transforming communities into fortresses. From this point of view – even before the outbreak of the pandemic – the virus has become the general meta-forum of all our nightmares. But there was a moment when, at least on the biological level, that fear eased. I am talking about the 1950s and 1960s, when was spread the optimistic idea

that antibiotic medicine could eradicate some age-old diseases. This went on until AIDS appeared. Then the psychological dam collapsed. Real and symbolic viruses, emerged before us, invincible – capable of sucking us into their void of meaning and destroying us. It is then that the immunitarian need has grown, until it became our fundamental measure, the very shape we have given to our life.

But, as we said, the immunity necessary to protect our life – never as today do we experience how much we need it –, if taken beyond a certain limit, ends up denying it. It forces life into a sort of cage where we risk not only losing our freedom, but also the very meaning of our individual and collective existence. Here is the antinomy on which we should focus: what protects the body, both personal and social, can also block its development. It could be said that high-dose immunization means sacrifice of qualified life, to the reasons of simple survival. To survive as such, life appears forced to incorporate that nothing it wants to avoid. We find the same implicit contradiction in the procedure of vaccination – which of course today is more necessary than ever. When one takes a vaccine in the face of a disease, a sustainable portion of the disease is introduced into their organism. It is almost as if to keep someone in life it is necessary to make him taste death. After all, the Greek word *pharmakon* contains from the beginning the double meaning of 'cure' and 'poison' – poison as a cure, cure through poison.

The problem is that the immunitarian device can always get out of hand. To get a non-metaphorical idea of this, we should consider autoimmune diseases, when the immune system reacts so powerfully that it turns against the very body it should defend, destroying it. It has been noted that this mechanism – an excess of defensive antibodies – is also present in COVID-19. In coronavirus patients, the classic counter-effect of immune procedures is determined when they are pushed beyond their normal function. Attempting to block infected cells, the immune system produces a very strong inflammation that can cause lethal damage to the lungs. At that point, an attempt is made to stop this internal storm by using immuno-suppressants, which block the action of the immune system.

Never as today – under the attack of the coronavirus – the immune paradigm has become the keystone of our life system, the pivot around which our entire existence seems to revolve. From whatever side - biological, social or political – our experience is interrupted, the imperative remains the same: to prevent contagion wherever it lurks.

Of course, this is a real need. Today – waiting for a vaccine, that is, induced immunity – immunization by distancing is the only line of resistance behind which we can, and must, barricade ourselves. At least until the threat subsides. But we should not ignore the limit, beyond which this mechanism cannot work without producing irreparable failures. Not just on the economical level. But also, on the anthropological one.

Immunity is a protection, but a negative protection – which distances us from the greater evil through a lesser evil. This is also true on the social level, where the risk of desocialization is anything but unfounded. It can be said that contemporary society today is united by the separation of living bodies. Of course, also in this case it is a question of proportions. Everything is about respecting the delicate balance between community and immunity. A certain desocialization is inevitable today. But only to the point where denial does not prevail over protection, undermining the very body it should defend. Beware – this threshold may not be far. Today, under the pressure of the virus, the only way for our societies to escape the danger, is through the sacrifice of some personal freedoms. But how long will this be possible, without prohibiting the most intense meaning of our existence – which is the life of relationships? The same immunity, which serves to save life, could drain the sense out of it.

The problem that we face, even today, is not the simplistic one of contrasting community and immunity, but articulating them in a sustainable form that does not sacrifice one in favour of the other. Of course, today, perhaps as never before in all recent history, we are witnessing an abnormal surge of the request for immunity. The balance between *communitas* and *immunitas* seems to be broken in favour of the latter. The limit appears to have been overcome, with the consequence of minimizing life in common. How to restore it? Where to find the right point of articulation between community and immunity? With what preconditions and with what tools?

3. I believe that the problem needs to be tackled on a double level. That of the deactivation of negative immunization systems and that of the activation of new spaces in the municipality. As for the first level, the difficulties are not lacking. It is a question of distinguishing between devices of prohibition, control and exclusion. Between systems designed to protect our individual and collective experience, making it safer, and apparatuses that excessively reduce our freedom, our sociability, our curiosity towards others. This is particularly difficult because they are often the same devices. Control measures in airports and stations, photoelectric cells that frame our movements, apps that track our contacts, measures that are both necessary and insidious. I personally believe that the defense of life is a value superior to any other – if only because it is presupposed to them: in order to be free or to communicate with others, one must first be alive. But the limitation of freedom and sociality, should be kept to an indispensable minimum, by deactivating useless and harmful devices.

But the deactivation of negative or disbaring immunitarian devices, is only the first step, to which another equally necessary step must be added. The production of common spaces, spheres and dimensions must be placed side by side with the dissolution of the overly restrictive

immune bonds. For some time now, philosophers and jurists have started a work of redefining the concept of 'common good', hitherto compressed between private goods and goods. The first to be privatized were the environmental resources – water, land, air, mountains, rivers. Then the city spaces, squares, streets, public buildings, cultural heritage. Finally, the resources of intelligence, communication spaces, information tools. Then, this privatization of the public was intertwined with the reverse phenomenon of the publicization of the private sector, with the acquisition and dissemination of sensitive data. Between these two trends, the dimension of the common risks being squeezed.

But it is precisely on this terrain that something like a return of the community must be thought, and then made real. It must start from a rupture with the alternative between public and private, which risks crushing the common, focusing instead on expanding the space for the common use of goods. In this sense, the category of use must, if not replace, at least be put alongside that of ownership. Using a thing does not necessarily mean owning it on your own, but making a use of it that others will be also able to make in their turn, without necessarily owning it. The conflicts that have started all over the world, and also in Italy, over the attempts to privatize water, the appropriation of energy sources and the multiplication of exclusive patents of medicines by pharmaceutical companies in the poorest areas of the planet, go in this direction. This is a difficult battle because at the moment there are no statutes and legal codes aimed at protecting the common from the private sector and the state. In truth, there is not even an adequate lexicon to talk about something – the common – historically excluded, first from the process of modernization and then from that of globalization.

The common is neither the public, which is opposed by the private, nor the global, which is opposed by the local. It is something unknown, and even refractory, to our conceptual categories, which have long been framed in the grids of the general immunitarian system. And yet the wager of a return of the community is played precisely on this possibility. On the ability, to act, and even before that, to think within this horizon.

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

"Changing Life? Fortunes and Misfortunes of "Biopolitics" in the Age of Covid-19"

Isabelle Garo

Abstract: The ongoing pandemic seems to have dramatically affirmed the relevance of the notion of biopolitics and the subject of life more broadly. The notion was, however, developed by Michel Foucault in a very different social and political context from that of ours. After investigating the background and implications of his analysis, this article focuses on Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito's reappropriation of biopolitics and the metaphysical turn that they brought about. Besides these approaches, the notions of bio-economy and bio-capitalism open up new pathways that are more attentive to today's economic and social realities. Within the light of these questions and Agamben's and Esposito's theoretical elaborations, Marxist approaches to metabolism and social reproduction apprehend the question of life in a decisive way, directly connected to the will to construct an alternative to the form of Disaster Capitalism that currently menaces nature and humanity.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Biocapitalism, Social Reproduction, Marxism, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito

The proliferation of a concept

The COVID-19 pandemic that took off in 2019 constitutes a total event because it incarnated, on an unprecedented and global scale, the interwovenness of all ongoing crises and the absence of any foreseeable way out of the catastrophic outburst that we're witnessing. Demanding analysis and inviting us to think about ruptures in a time that had banished them from the horizon, the situation has, among other collateral effects, provoked the accelerated proliferation of the subject of biopolitics, which has been developing in contemporary critical thought over the last decade. The causes of this success are multiple: its erudite as much as its suggestive character, its indefinite expansions and its futurist connotations, its critical fragrance, and Foucauldian ascendancy having become true radicalism's criteria, the term seems to be the most adequate, if not to analyse the causes of the current situation, at least to announce the scope of the stakes.

Indeed, the term biopolitics has every advantage to evoke, by itself, a number of growing trends that all have to do with life in direct connection with, or not, the question of epidemiology: the increase of zoonoses (a pathogen that goes from non-human to human), the large scale effects of agro-industry, the transformations of medicine and the joint comeback of bioethics and law, progress made in genetics and genomics, the role of the pharmaceutical industry, the commodification and patenting of the living, the boom in bio-technology, the rise of post-humanist questions, the ideological turn of neuroscience, the power of pro-life, survivalist, and other reactionary movements, everything against a backdrop of environmental urgency and a major economic crisis.

Yet, far from being an established concept within a precise analytical framework, the umbrella term “biopolitics” is suggestive of, without defining all combinations imaginable of politics and life, notions that are in themselves highly polysemous: life or the life sciences as politics, politics as life, life as an object of politics, etc.

The paradox is at its peak when adding that the notions of biopolitics and biopower were developed by Foucault in the mid-70s,¹ and remained incompletely developed by Foucault. Before abandoning them, he continuously remoulded them, giving them the status of a starting point, a sketch, for a theory of society and state that above all saw itself as an alternative to Marxist critiques of political economy and its political consequences. Dismissing the questions of the organisation of production and class conflict, abandoning the prospect of equality and revolution, Foucault approaches political and social reality from the combined perspective of procedures of subjectivation and apparatuses of governmentality, affecting bodies as well as populations.

If the term biopolitics survived its initial trajectory, to the extent that it seems wrong to stretch sketching an overview, its contemporary reappropriation brings about a radical recasting. Certain philosophers aimed to readjust the subject of biopolitics, by proposing competing and incompatible approaches, throughout the process of which they enriched biopolitics’ vocabulary with a set of additional neologisms: “immunopolitics”, “thanatopolitics”, “bioeconomy”, “biocapitalism”, etc. The notion of “biopower” and “biopolitics,” reworked and strengthened into concepts if not into doctrines, have hence become the pivot of philosophical approaches that tend to make the management of life the alpha and the omega of politics and its history. This is notably the case of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito.

Ceasing to be a research hypothesis and a means to confront Marxism, contemporary biopolitics announces itself within the affirmative register of revelation. Looking for metaphysical foundations and not political standpoints, biopolitics reintroduced itself on the terrain of classical philosophy that critical thought in the 70s had abandoned. Despite the post-Foucauldian starbust around its biopolitical core, there is a red thread running through its diverse conceptualisations: an affirmation that the historical rupture has already taken place. The task would be to describe it, and without a doubt also to dread it, but there’s no hope to escape capitalism’s kettle that, ever more than before, is capable of colonising bodies and the living in their entirety.

At the same time, disconnected from philosophical considerations that are increasingly cut off from the social sciences and of concrete history, it is also on the terrain of economic and sociological analysis that studies of the growing entanglement of capitalism and the life

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¹ Lemke 2011, p.9

sciences, using terms such as “biocapitalism” and “bioeconomy” or even developing the question of living labour as the central site of resistance against capitalist logic. These approaches, which aren’t concerned with the question of foundations, try to be descriptive as well as prospective, whilst simultaneously proposing a sometimes-critical analysis of neoliberalism.

Given these conditions, rather than coming up with yet another version of the biopolitical thesis or to disqualify it, it is more useful to consider it as one of the present’s manifestations. How are we to understand that a topic, which came about more than fifty years ago, is spearheading innovative approaches validated by the pandemic to the point of elevating the present to a “Foucauldian moment,”² the core event residing in the strange coincidence finally established between things and their order, between a concept of the 1970s and today’s historical moment?

Looking to answer this question, the first part of this article is dedicated to the examination of certain central versions of biopolitics in line with Foucault’s analysis, by resituating this history within the context of neoliberal policies and the weakening of the labour movement of which the former was an effect of the latter and sometimes its cause. The second part connects this critique to a Marxist approach to social reproduction, seeking to redefine the notion of life closely connected to a politics that focusses on the collective reconstruction of a determined alternative to disaster capitalism.³ Instead of a descriptive or ominous biopolitics, the objective is here to think of a concrete social vitality, full of possibilities, enmeshed with life in the broadest of terms, and of which capitalism set itself the task to fully commodify.

Biopolitics according to Michel Foucault: a strategic hypothesis

If the concept of biopower makes its initial—in print—apparition in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault had already started to develop it in his lectures at the Collège de France, firstly from 1975 to 1976 (*Society Must Be Defended*), and subsequently from 1977 to 1978 (*Security, Territory, Population*) and from 1978 to 1979 (*The Birth of Biopolitics*). But the questioning itself has its roots in earlier works, notably in *The Order of Things*, published in 1966, which already compared the rise of political economy to that of the life sciences.

This incessantly transforming research project was constructed in connection with the vast mutations of the French political, cultural, and ideological landscape starting in the mid-70s and that Foucault managed

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2 Cot 2020

3 Klein 2008

to capture with unbeatable acuteness. His lectures at the Collège de France are a testing ground for the most daring of his conceptual hypotheses allowing to get a sense of the successive readjustments of Foucault's thought and the general limits it upholds.

Daniel Defert cites a letter from 1972 in which Foucault announces to analyse “the most disparaged of all wars: neither Hobbes, nor Clausewitz or class struggle: civil war.”⁴ Foucault develops the first model, that of war borrowed from Nietzsche, in his 1976 lecture, before abandoning it. But the hypothesis is the occasion to try out the definition of an alternative form of antagonism to that of class struggle. Above all, the notion tries to encompass class by making its assertion simply the extension of a persistent repression model: that of racial conflict. The thesis is provocative, and even more so because the colonial question is at the same time almost completely silenced.

Gradually developed in his lectures the years that follow, the concept of “biopower” gives substance to the previous research agenda. It presents itself like a new hypothesis, reorganising a constellation of adjacent notions, which themselves are continuously reworked in order to distinguish and cross-pollinate diverse modalities of power. “Norms,” “governmentality,” “security,” “control,” “discipline,”⁵ etc. frame this theoretically abundant space around its central node: rethinking politics at a doubly removed distance of sovereignty and social antagonism.

Vigilant and flexible, reactive to context and attached to construct a global and original understanding of a history relevant to the emergence of a second left, Foucauldian thought remains structured around a permanent confrontation with Marxism. As May 68 starts to wane and the long-term crisis of communism begins to deepen, but equally within the context of the Union of the Left and facing the repressive hypothesis shared by Freudianism and leftism, Foucault reorients himself towards a profoundly ambiguous form of history from below. This variety of history, which is by far more philosophical than historicist, pays attention to norms and the ways in which individuals are simultaneously their intermediaries, their products and sites of continued resistance giving rise to and modifying the forms of the now radically delocalised and desubstantialised forms of power.

Highlighting the productivity and the capillarity of power beyond solely its repressive and vertical dimensions, the Foucauldian concept of biopower stands in opposition to conceptions of the state and Ideological State Apparatuses, as advanced by Louis Althusser. Power, redefined in this way, is indissociable from the knowledge that supports and inhabits it: a reconceptualisation that finds itself to be at the antipodes of the habitual opposition between oppression and truth; between ideology and

4 Defert 2001, p.42

5 Foucault 1997, p.222

science. But biopolitics, far from being the last Foucauldian analytical tool, is the cornerstone of a more ambitious project. It seeks to produce another critique of political economy, associated with a new conception of subjectivation that draws upon the close-examination of punitive devices – carceral and medical – as they evolve throughout history. In his 1976 lectures, Foucault develops the biopower hypothesis by associating it with a theory of governmentality that gets rid off social relations of production by relying on a greater attention paid to what would be the concrete par excellence: the body. Transitioning, according to him, from the prerogative of “to make die and let live” to the preoccupation of “make live and to let die” power undergoes a metamorphosis. Affirming the trend of foregrounding the ever more direct connection between bodies and a power that has become diffuse, Foucauldian theory transforms its own bypassing of the state in an objective historical fact that ratifies the virulent philosophical rejections of mediation and representation that he shares with the new and non-Marxist French philosophy of the time.

This thesis of biopower that directly builds upon individual and social life dissolves social conflict into a myriad of isolated confrontations, a perpetual Brownian motion without resolution: “power is never entirely on one side, [...] at every moment, it plays out in smaller singular units with local reversals, regional defeat and victories, provisional revenge.”⁶ Foucault, at times, credits Marx for being the first to analyse discipline (Foucault 2001b p. 1001), an acknowledgement that is used to pit itself against the rest of Marx’s work, with great effort to cover up his tracks and pursuing a confrontation meticulous to the extent that it could be confused for a claim of intellectual proximity.

The last major step in this trajectory is his study of neoliberal theories in 1977-78, driving Foucault to uphold that liberalism disposes of a sole and authentic “art of government” which, according to him, lacks in the socialist tradition. But what is this “art of government,” if it escapes a logic of sovereignty that was already obsolete by then? The following year, he says that it is nothing else than “the reasoned way of governing best”,⁷ the liberal version of which is, by essence, always concerned about its own autolimitation.⁸ Benefitting from an analysis of knowledge that rejects the Marxist concept of ideology, taking at face value the texts that he approaches as efficiency endowed discourse, Foucault concludes, the next year, that (neo)liberalism, throughout history, presented itself as a critique of irrationality “a critique of the irrationality peculiar to excessive government.”⁹

6 Foucault 1975, p.264

7 Foucault 2008, p.2

8 Ibid., p.20

9 Ibid., p. 341

It goes without saying that definitions like these were and remain, more than ever, questionable. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the subject of biopower played a fundamental and strategic role within the perpetual revision of the Foucauldian project. At the moment Foucault turns his back on leftism in order to come closer to the CFDT trade union and followers of Michel Rocard, clearing the way for a new conception of governmentality that resonates with the political efforts of the Second Left. In the face of a potential victory of the Union of the Left, the Second Left sought to invent a new social-democratic path, abandoning all hopes to break with capitalism yet without trying to win over the traditional right.

Before exploring how neoliberalism could become a working ground for an alternative governmentality, it is the biopower hypothesis that helps him to redefine the field, its method, and the implications of its own theoretical and political project.

Hence, the aim of the concept of biopower is not to periodise political history into distinct moments. Foucault has always insisted on the fact that different apparatuses of power do not succeed each other but merge and interpenetrate each other. Furthermore, this new conceptualisation of politics is inseparable from a novel view of knowledge and regimes of truth, referring to a redefined role of the intellectual, which was one of the major questions in France, and unique to it, at the time.

It is difficult to understand how the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, so powerfully determined by the theoretico-political trajectory of the author within the specific context that he wanted to intervene in, may be re-appropriated within the context of neoliberal's undisputable victory and the waning of the Fordo-Keynesian exception. Neoliberalism's stronghold, confronted with capitalism's multiple crises, comes with an authoritarian and repressive turn that seems to render this liberal analysis of governmentality obsolete.

Facing the untimely enigma of the resurgence of the notion of biopolitics, it is not enough to evoke the unequalled ideological power of neoliberal institutions and their infinite colours, capable of imposing the language of "good governance".¹⁰ Because it is rather the combination of neoliberalism's power to impose widely disavowed policies, against a backdrop of waning anticapitalistic alternatives and a rising fear of general collapse that explains the present proliferation of the notion of biopolitics or biopower, differently revised as disenchanting observations of total domination.

Within this context of anxious depoliticization and intensifying social antagonism, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the sentiment of

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that the outdated notion of "*governability*" reappears in a report by the trilateral commission, shortly before Foucault elaborates the term, in 1975.

the centrality of biological life expressed through its growing precarity. Paradoxically, in the name of an affirmation of politics grafting itself onto life, the rise of the subject of the body reveals itself to be a formidable instrument of abstraction, accompanying critique's metaphysical turn. It is imperative to start by examining this paradox through the most popular and well-received contemporary versions of biopolitics, namely, those of Agamben and Esposito.

Giorgio Agamben, the ontological turn of biopolitics

COVID-19 has been the occasion for Giorgio Agamben to see, within the time and space of a few days, his philosophy lauded before facing a barrage of criticism. The deluge followed after he took the risk to publish, in the Italian daily *Il Manifesto* of the 26th of February 2020, an intervention denouncing the "frenzied, irrational and totally unjustified emergency measures taken for a supposed epidemic."¹¹ Following the scandal it provoked, Agamben clarifies his position in an interview in *Le Monde*, published on the 24th of March: "what the epidemic clearly shows is that the state of exception, a state to which governments have now familiarised us with for a long time, has become the norm. People have habituated themselves to a permanent state of crisis that they do no longer seem to realise that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological function, and has not only lost its political dimension, but also any human dimension."¹²

This affirmation lacking any nuance does not summarise Agamben's thought but boils it down to its ethico-political conclusions, disregarding the metaphysical apparatus that underpins them. His oeuvre develops the expected at great length. Always driven by the question, "what does it mean to act politically?"¹³, each volume of *Homo Sacer* describes the principles and the implications of a conception of "the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics."¹⁴ This transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens radically to alter—in fact, has already palpably altered—the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms. Indeed, from this perspective, the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism.

This conception, that deliberately inscribes itself within the critical Foucauldian lineage of biopolitics, shares a number of commonalities

¹¹ Agamben 2020a

¹² Agamben 2020b

¹³ Agamben 2017, p.186

¹⁴ Ibid.

as well as divergences with this lineage that needs to be related to the profound transformations of the social and political context since the mid-1970s. To put it briefly: whereas Michel Foucault was still able to present the neoliberal project as a governmentality limiting itself, concerned about the well-being of populations and as an opportunity of a subjectivation open to the care of the self, the global hegemony of neoliberal politics and their regressive parade now forces us to reconsider this definition. What Agamben opted for, within this profoundly changed political, economic, and social context, is to reclaim the notion of state sovereignty. He puts forward a theorization that views the state of exception as the fundamental structure of Western politics, judged essential in its relation to life: “if the law employs the exception—that is the suspension of law itself—as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law.”¹⁵ The price paid for this simplification of a biopolitical theorisation of the relation between life and power is that it restores a universalising metaphysics, a move far removed from the Foucauldian project and its self-proclaimed nominalism.

Agamben builds his metaphysics around the distinction between natural life (*zoè*) and politically qualified life (*bios*) that characterises itself by exclusion and capture, giving rise to “bare life” as that which allows for an articulation between *zoè* and *bios*, but that does not precede it. Nonetheless, bare life is the originating structure of politics that reveals itself in exception as inclusive exception. The “*homo sacer*,” the guardian figure overlooking the whole of Agamben’s oeuvre, harks back to the individual whom, in Roman archaic law, can be put to death without it being recognized as homicide. Far from being a local and temporary legal aberration, this status, according to Agamben, would be sovereignty’s very structure, “the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension.”¹⁶

As a consequence, the military model, abandoned by Foucault, becomes pertinent again despite its schematism. Agamben is not afraid to mobilise and to dramatise it to its extreme in the wake of COVID-19: “it is even possible that the epidemic that we are living will be the realisation of global civil war that, according to the most thorough political scientists, has taken the place of traditional world wars. All nations and all peoples are now in an enduring war against themselves, because the invisible and elusive enemy with which they are struggling is within us.”¹⁷

.....
15 Ibid

16 Ibid., p.169

17 Agamben 2020c

Welcoming “Foucault’s thesis according to which “what is at stake today is life””,¹⁸ Agamben rapidly distanced himself from it in order to consider that “The *puissance absolue et perpétuelle*, which defines state power, is in the last instance not founded on a political will but on bare life, which is preserved and protected only to the extent that it is subjected to the sovereign’s (or the law’s)”.¹⁹ This peremptory affirmation, discussed at great length, does not rely on any factual data but mobilises, along medieval and ancient authors, repeated references to Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, but also Hannah Arendt, regardless of their mutual incompatibility.

Abandoning Foucauldian norm analysis and their ambivalent subjugating function as well as subjectivation and rejecting Marxian conceptions of the state without having discussed them, Agamben brings back political reflection on the terrain of a split, philosophically constructed, between sovereignty thought as transhistorical and a bare life, judged as unchanging. Some fleetingly mentioned examples, topped up with a stupefying critique of Marx, are mobilised to support the following thesis: “From the Marxian scission between man and citizen there follows that between bare life, ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty, and the multiple forms of life abstractly recodified into juridical-social identities (voter, employee, journalist, student, but also HIV-positive, transvestite, porn star, senior citizen, parent, woman).”²⁰

Dissociated from all historicist explorations of those disciplines, of techniques of power and forms of governmentality, which constitutes the Foucauldian methodology, the linear narrative that substitutes it simply affirms that “the juridico-political machine of the Occident”²¹ has as its aim the production of bare life. The characteristics of bare life is to be separated from all other forms of life and of all connections to an “anthropogenesis”, meaning “the becoming human of the human being.”²² This history, which progressively and systematically has made of a state of exception the rule, now reveals its hidden essence.

On his part, Foucault conceived of biopolitics as an experimental laboratory to build an alternative to Marxism, competing with its theoretical project and disqualifying its political aim of abolishing capitalism. Once the alternative got defeated and hopes for a stable form of capitalism were lost, and after the Foucauldian programme having shown its incapacity to escape neoliberalism’s appeal, biopolitics lost all

.....
18 Agamben 2017, p.1216

19 Ibid., p.1215

20 Ibid., p.1216

21 Agamben 2017, p.360, translation my own, S.M.

22 Ibid. p.1215

its authority. The last move left, in its multitude of variations, is to play on the pathos of a menaced and helpless life. The accusation of the Western state in general and its fundamental tendency to end in extermination camp logics, and nothing less, offers but a discourse repeating *ad nauseam* the dark prophecy of its own realization.²³

Behind his argumentative refinement, Agamben promotes a fundamentally binary speculative anarchism that opposes a tendentially exterminating power to a rebel destituent power that invariably replicates its antithesis, but that yet succeeds in “thinking (*sic*) a purely destituent potential, which is to say, one completely set free from the sovereign relation of the ban that links it to constituted power.”²⁴ Singing the same old tune of revolutions inevitably ending up in statism and authoritarianism, Agamben is opposed to all social and economic reform. The only thing left is to offer some consolation in the erudition and morals of Patristics and medieval Aristotelianism.

Nonetheless, certain passages give the impression that we’re not really dealing with an ethics. Recalling that Franciscans never criticised property, Agamben considers Saint-Paul as the precursor of this desubjectification and of the “mystique of daily life” which he wishes to see as the only escape from subjugation. Paul “calls “usages” ways of life that at the same time do not directly confront power (...). It seems to me that the notion of way of life, in this sense, is very interesting: it is a practice of which we cannot assign the subject. You remain a slave, but, because you are making use of it, in the form of the “as not,” you are no longer a slave.”²⁵ Within this “as not” form, everything effectively resembles its contrary, the most disgraceful statements become the bearers of the highest morals and the sanctification of the present its most radical critique.

Agamben’s thought, thus, transits from ontology to ontology occasionally ornamenting itself with allusions to a real world that is already presupposed to be fully revealed and reduced to its immanent legal logic. Hence, the rejection of contradictions, another debt to the philosophy of the previous sequence, leads him to affirm, without any nuance and regardless of all factual data, a social world that is ever more homogenous, without class, composed of individuals that are all identically numb, arrived at a stage of supreme debilitation, with the almost miraculous exception of the author’s diagnostics: “if we had once again to conceive of the fortunes of humanity in terms of class, then today we would have to say that there are no longer social classes,

.....
23 Boukalas 2014. The critique of the legal component of this argument has been developed by Boukalas.

24 Agamben 2017, p.1269

25 Agamben 2020, translation my own S.M.

but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie, in which all the old social classes are dissolved.”²⁶

Continuing in this vein, Agamben does not hesitate to state that this massification verifies fascist theses by realising them. If the world is fascist, the fascist fantasy of a social world without conflict is nothing but its adequate theory. And if the levelling out of class is no longer the enchanting prognostics of social democratic sociologists who converted to liberalism, like Alain Tourinae did, the withering of class difference is proof of this irresistible fascist victory because it already took place: “but this is also exactly what fascism and Nazism understood, and to have clearly seen the irrevocable decline of the old social subjects constitutes their insuperable cachet of modernity. (From a strictly political point of view fascism and Nazism have not been overcome, and we still live under their sign.)”²⁷

With Agamben, biopolitics literally collapses on top of the metaphor that gives it ground, no longer designating eternal conflict between two entities. Power, whatever its form and the epoch, is merely an artificial graft of which the causes remain incomprehensible. This conception makes it impossible to envisage whatever perspective for radical democratisation and the social organization of production, whilst simultaneously excluding from its field of analysis the question of exploitation and domination, as well as the struggles that fight them.

Thus, after having distorted the contemporary state into an exterminatory machine, Agamben can conclude that “the novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.”²⁸

In one go, the overcoming of capitalism and the conquest of state power are sidelined, supposedly destined to relapse into totalitarianism, for the benefit of an immediacy that reconnects with romantic and reactionary ideals and its vitalist offshoots, from Edmund Burke to Friedrich Nietzsche and from Henri Bergson to Gustave Le Bon, to mention only a few. Biopolitics understood in these terms reactivates the old organicist conception of politics: “Western politics is, in this sense, constitutively “representative,” because it always already has to reformulate contact into the form of a relation. It will therefore be necessary to think politics as an intimacy unmediated by any articulation or representation: human beings, forms-of-life are in contact, but this is unrepresentable because it consists precisely in a representative void,

.....
26 Agamben 2007, p.70

27 Ibid

28 Ibid., p.80

that is, in the deactivation and inoperativity of every representation. To the ontology of non-relation and use there must correspond a non-representative politics.”²⁹

In the rarefied ether of pure concepts, but also in the context of the advanced crisis of democracy, these types of sentences ring true, at first glance, because they reflect and propagate such a long-lasting depoliticisation that it causes the forgetting and the denial of that history itself, of the history of the left’s political and social defeat. The literary completion of the Italian left’s debacle transformed into destiny, these analyses hit the wall regarding those issues that they’re supposed to tackle: the COVID-19 crisis does not really reaffirm the excess of the state in general, but rather the failure of collectively organising public services, and more broadly the blatant lack of democratic forms of organisation and the planification of human activities, overall.

Roberto Esposito's Immunopolitics

The Italian philosopher of the same generation as Agamben, Roberto Esposito proposes a variation of biopolitics readjusted to our present condition, and elaborates the notion of “immonupolitics,” closely resonating with the current pandemic. Coming up with another dissident reading of Foucauldian biopolitics, Esposito suggests to understand the problem of immunity as a profound historical causality: “this need for exemption and protection that originally belonged to the medical and juridical fields, has spread to all sectors and languages of our lives, to the point that the immunitary *dispositif* has become the coagulating point, both real and symbolic, of contemporary existence.”³⁰

Looking to escape the aporia and political impasses to which Agamben's work leads, Esposito holds on to its ontological pre-occupations, hereby equally setting out on a quest for some ultimate and abstract principle of understanding. It is to the opposition between immunity and community that he ascribes that role. According to him, if every society expresses “a demand for autoprotection,” a thesis he presents as evidence requiring no further proof, this demand would today have become “the linchpin around which both the real and imaginary practices of an entire civilization have been constructed.”³¹

Like for Agamben, only etymology allows to excavate a hidden and sustainably operative foundation: in Latin, *immunitas* and *communitas* are derived from *munus*, law, change or gift. *Immunis* thus designates those who have no obligations towards the other. In light of this argument that the author qualifies as “etymologico-paradigmatic,” his

.....
29 Agamben 2017, p.1243

30 Esposito 2013, p.59

31 Ibid

conclusion imposes itself even better than were it to simply precede and guide the analysis: “modern democracy speaks a language that is opposed to that of community insofar as it always has introjected into it an immunitary imperative.”³²

While distinguishing himself from Agamben, Esposito's political diagnosis is dark: “a world without an outside— that is, a world completely immunized— is by definition without an inside.”³³The immunity model of politics finds itself anchored to a metaphor that medicalises the social in order to better denounce this logic, supposedly real, following this circular deduction. But the circularity of the analysis posits itself as the reflection of a self-devouring world, drowning in a never-ending play of mirrors between identity and false otherness.

Hence appropriating the case of auto-immune diseases, Esposito describes what he considers to be the contemporary world's auto-destruction, torn between diverse “civilisations” that, in reality, only form a single one. The 9/11 attacks, elevated to the status of an paradigmatic event, “in other words, the present conflict appears to burst forth from the dual pressure of two immunitary obsessions that are both opposed and specular: an Islamic extremism that is determined to protect to the death what it considers to be its [...] purity from contamination by Western secularization, and a West that is bent on excluding the rest of the planet from sharing in its own excess goods.”³⁴The egocentric North against the envious South turning the poverty it endures into a phantasmagoric purity: the analysis reaching its peak when presenting this opposition as a stable arch that the 9/11 attacks would have breached.

Because, in a typical utterance of this metaphysical turn in contemporary political philosophy that in fact propagates the worst of clichés, Esposito is not afraid to proclaim that “what exploded along with the Twin Towers was the dual immunitary system that until then had kept the world intact.”³⁵ When it comes to the authoritarian and surveillance turn of the neoliberal state, far from offering an analysis of its political and social functions, it is only looked at through the lens of a rhetorical model, this time on the level of metonymy: exclusion would be the buried truth of politics, which would be sufficient a description of the whole of politics. Either way, Agamben repeats that modernity characterises itself by the fact that life has become directly political. Biopolitics is the designation of this ongoing fusion, a proposal that is far removed from the apparatuses of control studied by Foucault.

.....
32 Ibid., p.39

33 Ibid., p.46

34 Ibid., p.62

35 Ibid.

For Esposito as well as for Agamben, *reductio ad hitlerium*, to borrow Leo Strauss term, reveals itself to be the central node of post-Foucauldian biopolitics. Crediting Nietzsche with an unprecedented political lucidity regarding the growing domination that politics exercises over life, Esposito considers that “twentieth-century totalitarianism, but especially that of the Nazis, signals the apex of this thanatopolitical drift”.³⁶ “as in so-called autoimmune diseases, here too the immune system is strengthened to the point of fighting the very body that it should be saving, but it is now causing that body’s decomposition.”³⁷ Extending the metaphor a little too far, Esposito does not seem to notice that he simultaneously legitimises another, more appropriate, immune-reaction. It is difficult to escape slippery into reactionary vitalism when it is never addressed.

Attributing to Nazism the invention of their own philosophy, following Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas 2018), Esposito criticises it for only being “a philosophy entirely translated in biological terms.”³⁸ Henceforth, he permits himself to observe Nazism from this angle of this theoretical, biologising, inversion, substituting real historical processes, that of the historical emergence of fascism, and its current revival. By virtue of this strictly rhetorical analysis of history, that doesn’t confront itself to any other analysis, the abolition of mediation appears as a fact, as irreversible as the growing confusion between norm and exception: “contrary to the illusions of those who imagined it was possible to retroactively skip over what for them amounted to the Nazi parenthesis so as to reconstruct the governing principles of the preceding period, life and politics are bound together in a knot that can’t be undone.”³⁹

These broken mediations that are the state and institutions, but also organised forms of class struggle, are defined as the perversion and capture of life. Subsequently, the analysis here converges with fascist hatred for political parties, unions, parliaments, without worrying to turn the ideology that accompanied their violent destruction into a valid theory. Paying the price of this outrageous concession, politics, as a whole, is presented to be destined to fall back “more and more made [on] the bare ground of biology. Terrorism would be the simple and pure achievement of Nazi thanato-politics. “No longer does only death make a dramatic entrance into life, but now life itself is constituted as death’s instrument”, whereas, again as this mirror-image, “the prevention of mass terror itself tends to absorb and reproduce the very modalities of terror.”⁴⁰

.....
36 Ibid., p.73

37 Ibid.

38 Esposito 2010, p.160

39 Esposito 2013, p.75

40 Ibid., pp.76-77

The biopolitical hypothesis, transformed into a key to universal understanding, opens itself up to a catastrophic and simplistic scenario, a by-product of an inverted philosophy of history that underpins this political variant of collapsology. Leading to overwhelming stupefaction, it no longer rhymes with the hopes of a third way, which drove Foucault, but with the observation of its failure, a failure strengthened by ever recalling, not only the complete disappearance of revolutionary projects, but equally the highly restrained possibilities to transform social life.

If there’s any hope afloat, this shipwreck of emancipation, in the mixed waters of dissolved politics, it is only a vague perspective, never constructed intentionally, of a “democratic biopolitics, that is capable of exercising itself not on bodies but in favor of them”, the author recognising that what this “might mean today is quite difficult to identify conclusively.”⁴¹ Within the direct lineage of the philosophical tradition of the 1970s and of its critique of the subject, Giorgio Agamben equally recommends desubjectivation, whereas Esposito is pleading for a “philosophy of the impersonal,” the category of person would be, according to him, the origin of all discrimination.

However, in an interview he gave regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Esposito significantly bends his position and suddenly changes his vocabulary. On the one hand, he states that “our capitalist society is fundamentally an unequal society. In critical situations, this inequality becomes more pronounced, but also less and less bearable” (Esposito 2020). On the other hand, he undertakes to concretise his notion of “affirmative biopolitics,” advocating for investments in public healthcare, the construction of hospitals, free access to medication, etc. These remarks, that are more readily associated with traditional critiques of capitalism, to which the notion of biopolitics adds nothing, does not find any resonance in the rest of his oeuvre.

For want of a political consideration of these propositions, and a precise and documented study of the ongoing course of neoliberalism, Esposito’s suggestions are stuck in traditional recipes that today are equally in crisis. A crisis that moreover constitutes the origin and horizon of his thought: “Institutions are necessary. But the point is that, with institutions, we should not only think about the state or state apparatuses. An institution is also a non-governmental organization or a volunteer group.”⁴² Despite the lack of audacity of this proposal, it remains true that such an obvious contradiction challenges his entire conceptual edifice that those few lines manage to undermine.

.....
41 Ibid., pp.110-111

42 Esposito 2020

Bioeconomy or biocapitalism?

Based on this brief exposition, we can thus ask ourselves what purpose the concept of biopolitics serves today. If it's incapable of adequately describing a historically determined moment in time, is it only the expression of political hopelessness sublimated into an absolute metaphysics, an erudite pathos? Is it destined to lead, after going through the same arguments all over again, to the circumventing of all analysis of capitalism without taking the time to discuss existing research? What had been Foucault's permanent confrontation with Marx, and through his thought with socialist alternatives or communism, continuously energised his research, the notion of biopolitics representing only one of its landmarks. The disappearance of this antagonism gives way to a discourse that, without end, dizzily runs in circles around its own presuppositions.

However, is it desirable to simply dismiss the notion of biopolitics, reducing it to mystifying chatter? Because the notion does have its effects and stakes. If its fault is to incite passivity, its merit remains to stress the murderous turn of neoliberal politics and to ring alarm at the destruction that it imposes on our lives and nature. Ecocides but also feminicides and racism, ravaging social life, make all the more manifest the inclusion of the human world in nature that it transforms as well as the socialisation that that relation brings about.

But even for Hegel, the postures of the beautiful soul have objective consequences that demand to overcome the moment of pure lamentation. Today, the causes should be sought on the side of capitalism's interlocked crises, multiplying one after the other. If the pandemic highlights the fact that, eventually, it is a gamble with human life, it are the ongoing processes that need to be grasped, the contradictions and the fissures that to be opened, the mediations and transformations that need to be rebuilt within the context of the relentless social struggles of our time. The current situation reveals that it is not the tendential victory of the logic of extermination, but the general repressive intensification that comes with the degradation of the public health care system, after decennia of neoliberal politics seeking to destroy and to commodify public services. And yet, it's this dimension that biopolitical analyses circumvent, incapable of thinking the complexity of the capitalist state in connection to real power relations and to the long conflictual history that it grounds.

It turns out that other approaches that affirm the centrality of life have tried to rectify this shortcoming. This is the case for the term of bioeconomics, coined as early as in the 1970s by the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and that later got picked up by degrowth and development economics proponents, such as René Passet in France. But this approach is equally reexplored, in particular since the 2010s, and connected to the rise of environmental concerns, by neoliberal institutions and their promoters.

On their part, liberal theoreticians of bioeconomics tend to construct a euphoric vision of green capitalism, based on a quiet transition from fossil fuels to renewable biomass energy. The European Commission endowed itself with a "Bioeconomy Observatory," and France, like autres states, declares itself to be concerned with "bioeconomic strategy". The Club of Rome is one of its pioneers, commissioning the MIT for their famous Meadows report on the "limits of growth," developing the notion of "zero growth," questioning, above all, population growth in the Global South. If the report incited extensive debate at the time, it also was the occasion for conservatism and catastrophism to come together, attributing centrality to the question of life on both an economic and ideologic level.

Biopolitics distinguishes itself from this approach. On the contrary to classical notions of biopolitics, that opposed to Marxism another conception of history, it is remarkable that contemporary analysts of biocapitalism return to the work of Marx in order to find a way towards a renewed critique of political economy. As such, the anthropologist and researcher of new technologies, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, suggests to redefine "coproduction," the relation between the social sciences and life sciences on the one hand and economics on the other, reminding that 'the life sciences are overdetermined by the capitalistic political economic structures within which they emerge.'⁴³

Exploring the coexistence between market and the speculative logics of pharmaceutical industries and biotech in the US and in India, he stresses the economic and social diversity internal to capitalism. But, within the context of global biocapitalism, the national specificities of biocapital are to be linked to the different strategies of large industrial groups. This would however not announce "a new phase of capitalism,"⁴⁴ whilst giving rise to "something more than just the encroachment of capital on a new domain of the life sciences."⁴⁵

Sweeping aside familiar accusations of reductionism held against Marx, accusations the unequal ability of Marxism to analyse the way in which capital flows "are constantly animated by multiple, layered, and complex interactions between material objects and structural relations of production, on the one hand, and abstractions, whether they are forms of discourse, ideology, fetishism, ethics, or salvatory or nationalist belief systems and desires, on the other."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, he insists on isolating Marx's "methodology" from any revolutionary option.⁴⁷

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43 Sunder Rajan 2006, p.6

44 Ibid., p.277

45 Ibid., p.283

46 Ibid., p.20

47 Ibid., p.7

The sociologist Melinda Cooper goes a step further into politicising the analysis of biocapitalism, by studying the relation between capital's current accumulation regime on the one hand, and life sciences and technology on the other, but equally their combination, at first glance improbable, with the ideology of the American evangelical right. She shows that on the contrary to the leftish and oppositional hues of these questions and their appearance on the terrain of French and continental philosophy, American post-industrial literature that developed within the lineage of the Meadows report, as well as the corresponding growth in popularity of the notion of bioeconomy, opened the way to neoliberal politics initiated by Ronald Reagan, "a policy that combined virulent anti-environmentalism and cutbacks in redistributive public health with massive federal investment in the new life science technologies."⁴⁸

In this context, which is also that of an American imperialist politics, Cooper pinpoints the existence of "intense traffic of ideas between recent theoretical biology and neoliberal rhetorics of economic growth."⁴⁹ She brings to light the ideological construction that will allow neoliberals, under George W. Bush's presidency, to combine developments in the biomedical sector, and more particularly in STEM with cells coming from frozen embryos, the commercialization of the life sciences but also the reorientation of biology for military ends, reactionary pro-life and survivalist gospel, white supremacy, neoconservative discourse and protestant theology of debt, explicitly readjusted for the objective. "US imperialism (...) needs to be understood as the extreme, 'cultish' form of capital."⁵⁰ Using categories elaborated by Marx, allow her to think the interplay between this continuously remoulded ideology and the contradictory dynamics of capitalism: "the drive to overcome limits and relocate in the speculative future is the defining movements of capital, according to Marx."⁵¹

This neoliberal hegemony, forced into permanent offensive, knows how to connect its discourse and its practices, accompanying the rise of a bioeconomy that is both global and differentiated, in the context of an imperial and conflictual logic and in connection with a conception of work, production, and reproduction thought of as cost-reduction means. In this way, the European and North American pharmaceutical industry is offshoring its clinical tests on human guinea pigs to countries where ethical constraints are most relaxed, in particular in India and China: "this trend toward the offshoring of biomedical and clinical labor, along with the emergence of transnational markets in 'donated' organs, blood,

.....
48 Cooper 2015, p.18

49 Ibid., p.20

50 Ibid., p.165

51 Ibid., p.25

tissues and eggs, points to the new division of labor, life, and surplus that are likely to accrue around a fully fledged bioeconomy."⁵² In conclusion, she mentions, without further precision, the associated emergence of "new modes of contestation."⁵³

Despite its limits, the previous analyses of biocapitalism, breaking with vitalist metaphors as well as with the thesis of a direct grafting of politics onto life, undertakes a study of the strategies developed by neoliberal officials who are more than conscious of their class interests that they defend by managing a flawless art of mediation and lobbying. Their activity and convictions, in all respects, break with biopolitical theories. On the contrary to concerns about population, according to the hypothesis that naively takes the first version of neoliberal discourse at face value, but far removed from extermination logics, it's the strengthening of exploitation and all forms of oppression that neoliberalism now concentrates that Cooper and Rajan see as the only means to escape the crisis of capitalism, low productivity gains and the threat it presents to the rate of profit.

This logic of total commodification and the destruction of previous social gains includes a new relation to knowledge that goes as far as the falsification of scientific reports, to the point of, according to the Marxist biologist Rob Wallace, "perverting science for political gain is itself in a pandemic phase."⁵⁴ Given these conditions, the virus even becomes, in certain regards, a competitive opportunity. "In a kind of bioeconomic warfare, agribusiness can prosper when deadly influenza strains originating from their own operations spread out to their smaller competition. No conspiracy theory need apply. No virus engineered in a laboratory. No conscious acts of espionage or sabotage. Rather we have here an emergent neglect from the moral hazard that arises when the costs of intensive husbandry are externalized."⁵⁵

Hence, positioning himself in opposition to the conspiracy tendencies of Agamben, the real ideological power that accompanies the inverted world of capitalism does not consist out of lying but producing a discourse that represents a real descriptive capacity, readjusting dominant prejudices and beliefs to facts, whilst simultaneously combining this discourse with concrete political practices that in turn seem to validate them. Covid-19 is a perfect example of Naomi Klein's shock doctrine. It is the occasion to speed up neoliberal policy, to extend the control and repression of the working class and social mobilization, to fortify borders, stoking up racism and nationalism, reinforcing the

.....
52 Ibid., p.175

53 Ibid., p.176

54 Wallace 2016, p.22

55 Ibid., p.115

domination of women, accelerating the destruction of nature, whereas the pandemic, and public health disasters alike, are the very product of this logic of capitalism: the advanced dismantling of public services, rampant extractivism, anarchic urbanisation, deforestation, and the destruction of the natural habitats of pathogenic species, mass animal extinction, the explosion of agribusiness, the subjugation of the sciences, etc.

The profound movements of contemporary financialised capitalism are shining through the apparently natural character of the epidemic: the destruction of public healthcare is a choice that made it impossible to face the afflux of sick people, contributing to the rapid spread of the virus, that is indisputably dangerous but only relatively lethal, and transforming it into a large scale public health disaster. If, from the outbreak to its management, it is capitalism that is at stake, how to oppose a logic that is so consistent and powerful despite being in radical crisis? How to find an alternative project that is not stuck in counter discourse or in infinite variations of biopolitical catastrophism? An alternative that equally knows how to ground itself concretely in strategies and practices, struggles, and forms of organization that are capable to fight the ongoing destruction? In other words: how to rebuild a world, worthy of the name, upon preexisting and persistent solidarities?

Metabolism and social reproduction

It is thus not the objective to simply deal away with the question of life, but to redefine it and to repoliticise it, in order to intervene in the most vivid contradictions of a historical sequence that the pandemic accentuates and still accelerates—as if it needed it—our catastrophic course. Noticing these contradictions doesn't consist in bemoaning the colonization of the world and knowledge under the sway of power directly hooked up on the living, such an analysis crushes the space for political and social collective intervention. The question is rather to confront, theoretically and politically, a form of contemporary capitalism facing its own waning viability and growing radical contestation that it simultaneously fosters and fights. The exploration of a dialectics alike, beyond all ephemeral and stagnant opposition, is the prime condition to reconstituting a political perspective of radical change, an outlook that made up Marx's analytical principles: the critique of political economy.

By forbidding to think real contradictions in a dialectical theoretical framework, loathed by Foucault, biopolitics and its derivatives replicated, and amplified, the originally liberal split that tends to cut politics off from the relations of production. A conceptual tool for the long-standing circumvention of the question of production and reproduction, this approach initially contributed to refocussing critique on circulation and consumption, subsequently it narrowed analysis down to perfected forms of control, targeting individual bodies, before ending up with appalling metaphysics. Whereas the notion of biopolitics and bodies pretend to

exhume the most fundamental and most radical level of politics, it limited itself to visible manifestations of social relations, without proceeding to the study of concrete forms of exploitation and contemporary domination.

But how, whilst distancing ourselves from a descriptive or ominous biopolitics, to rethink a social vitality that is as fragile as it is tenacious, traversed by possibilities that in effect engage with the biological and natural phenomena that capitalism has undertaken to commodify, in order to work towards the reappropriation of our social and sentient lives? This is the prompt of the "*Structural One Health*". They propose a historico-materialist approach in aetiology linked to a detailed analysis of contemporary capitalism, of its modal chains and its social, and ecological consequences.⁵⁶

Seen from this angle, the question of life finds back its dynamism of social struggle and strategic perspectives that it integrates into its approach. Two topics in particular are to be reexplored. The first is that of living labour and of the labour force, allowing to come back to the question of production that had been abandoned by biopolitics. The second, in connection with the latter, is that of social reproduction, metabolism at the second level, which involves picking up again, not the vitalist metaphor and its naturalising unthought, but the question of the nature-human unity in order to readjust it to the most lively and vibrant political issues of our time.

In both cases, the question is to abandon the simple opposition between vital dynamism and stultifying structures. Because capitalism itself is also a dynamic and adapting process — even if it takes life only by vampirising social activity, in accordance with Marx's formula — although being structured in forms and institutions that assure its reproduction and regulation. Capitalism distinguishes itself from other modes of production because of its tendency to appropriate, as fully as possible, the labour force, the time of people's lives and to take hold of the future itself. In this regard, the diverse analyses of living labour as the central site of resistance to the logic of capital, as developed by Italian operaists, Toni Negri, or by a theoretician of *Weltkritik*, such as Moishe Postone, also call for a discussion that does not have its place here.

Reconsidered as a determined historical contradiction, capitalist alienation is the site of struggle between a certain aspiration to reappropriate individual human capacities and their mutilating crushing. The question is thus rightly strategic and not metaphysical. How, departing from this aspiration, to trigger a "democratic revolution of labour",⁵⁷ a reappropriation of human activities whereof the results found

56 Foster & Suwandi 2020. "For proponents of Structural One Health the key is to ascertain how pandemics in the contemporary global economy are connected to the circuits of capital that are rapidly changing environmental conditions." (John Bellamy Foster et Intan Suwandi 2020).

57 Cukier 2020

themselves separated from, and turned against, their producers, on the economic and political but also the cultural domain? Thought in this way, the question of life extends itself to collective and revolutionary capacities inventing adequate forms for the reorganization of the relation between society and nature that constitutes a specific metabolism.

This notion of metabolism, used by Marx and revived notably by John Bellamy Foster,⁵⁸ which generated a very rich debate around *Metabolic Rift Theory*, allows to overcome the simplistic idea of human beings facing nature as an externality. It paves the way for what could be a redefinition of the politics and strategy of life in a broad sense, as a site for struggle that is now decisively between a democratic reappropriation of our collective history or its destruction by capitalism, in effect threatening, in the long-run, all forms of life. This approach makes of organised class struggle the means to reconnect the question of social needs and reproduction, broadly speaking, to a fight against the whole of existing forms of domination, allowing to think the political federation of struggles, not as a simple addition to isolated conflicts, but as a connected network of social conflicts, all linked to a mode of production that entered its lethal phase of “catastrophe capitalism”.

It are these challenges, as significant as they are urgent, that mirror the current pandemic and the concomitant rise of the question of biopolitics, failing to shed a light on the interaction between the causalities and their deep-rootedness in social work, production, and the reproduction of social life as a whole. The fact that migrants, people of colour, women, the working classes, and the global South are the first victims of this crisis, or, as David Harvey says, the fact that “the progress of COVID-19 exhibits all the characteristics of a class, gendered, and racialized pandemic” (Harvey 2020), demonstrates that biopolitics is decisively neither the name of the problem nor the solution, but actually the intuition of challenges of an unprecedented scale.

Social reproduction theory situates itself on a terrain that the notion of biopolitics cannot reach, because it conflates and confuses registers instead of articulating activities within the mode of production that would give them unity. If we situate ourselves on the terrain of the critique of political economy as Marx conceived it, meaning that it never reduces the question of production to solely its economic dimension, which in turn is often summarised as its commercial dimension, production is inseparable from reproduction. Reproduction is the quasi-biological, although fundamentally social, operation regenerating the labour force, but it is also the reproduction of social relations themselves, days after day.

Reproduction and production are not two distinct sections of social life, but two dimensions of the same logic. By virtue of his

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58 Foster 2011

understanding of the mode of production as a contradictory totality, Marx could state that “every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction.”⁵⁹ Their distinction lies in that the production process, considered as a process of reproduction, “produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces the capital relations itself ; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer,”⁶⁰ Here, it is not bare life that we need to identify behind apparatuses of power. It's on the contrary social life, concretely determined, and which thus requires to think production and reproduction as specifically capitalist.

Reproduction aims at the perpetuation of waged labour as such, meaning labour power itself, in concrete conditions and insofar “the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.”⁶¹ But this process is the centre of an essential contradiction that opposes the capitalist logic of transforming human work force in pure and simple commodities to the fact, as Marx stresses, that the work force is not produced as a commodity but only exchanged as such by those who own them. This exchange is the result of a long history of capitalist social formation, which separates workers from their means of production in order to convert them into wage-earners.

Changing life?

If the life of capitalism and the life imposed by capitalism are to be defeated, it is exactly because of their profoundly unlivable and lethal characteristics that makes it, eventually, unbearable. It needs to be immediately pointed out that this affirmation is not derived from some moral judgment or a confrontation with this form of life led astray from a “real life,” as an ontological critique would uphold. The argument here is the result of an immanent and objective critique deploying itself in direct connection with real contradictions and the conscient struggles that they fuel.

Nancy Fraser writes that “every form of capitalist society harbors a deep seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or ‘contradiction’”. On the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which he relies.”⁶² This contradiction gains a potential political reach, amplified by the current public health

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59 Marx 1976, p.711

60 Ibid., p.726

61 Ibid., p.718

62 Fraser 2017, p.63

crisis. The work force's relative protection, mediated by decisions that hamper if not block certain sectors of production, enters into a complex conflictual relation with a capitalist logic of precarisation, competition and social hierarchisation combining racism, sexism, and exploitation.

Initiating and aggravating, specifically, a crisis of reproduction, which yet is inseparable from the general crisis of capitalism, this contradiction is that which, underneath our eyes, is exploding and rightfully imposes the need to place the subject of life at the centre of analysis. This is what certain approaches to Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) try to achieve, wanting to contribute to anticapitalist struggles. "Social Reproduction Theory is primarily concerned with understanding how categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus-value."⁶³

In SRT, those who consider themselves to work within the Marxist tradition, it's in light of class struggle that questions regarding contemporary life are clarified. According to Martha Gimenez,⁶⁴ in accordance with the Marxian idea that the mode of production determines the mode of reproduction, it is indeed the capitalist class' control exercised over its own conditions of reproduction and those of the working classes that determines, in the last instance, relations between the sexes and the role of the family. But this control is contradictory in itself. Under capitalism, the worker, dispossessed from the means of production is only the owner of their labour power, that they "freely" sell and that they equally "freely" maintain, a form of care emanating from the private sphere of social production. This separation leads to making the nuclear family and domestic labour, carried out by women, the core site of the reproduction of the labour force.

Marked by relations of dependence and domination, taking on the appearance of free choice but also that of a form of domination that would be exclusively male, the household is the site where a complex causality unfolds and distorts itself, presenting the ambiguity, or more precisely the truly dialectical nature, of all mediations reconfigured by capitalism. Just like the state, knowledge, and money, the family home finds itself constituted into a separate sphere that refracts and reproduces the social relations of production that it might at first perceive as external or even radically foreign to itself.

Thus, like all other mediations, the family structure, the status of women, and in particular racialised women that see themselves being delegated household chores in a commodified form, but equally sexualities, are sites of specific struggles. These struggles, conceived

63 Battacharya 2017, p.46

64 Gimenez 2018, ch.2

of in a narrow way, can nourish insular identity logics, but they can also become the active source for growing anticapitalist consciousness, susceptible of putting the abolition of capitalism, through their political and critical structuring, back on the agenda.

From this point of view, affirming the centrality of capitalist relations of production does not undermine feminist (or antiracist) struggles in their fundamental connection to the ecological question. On the contrary, this affirmation consists in recognising causal subordination as well as the centrality of reproductive work that, in all its dimensions, contributes to forge labour power as a capacity or a power of the living individual, irreducible to their status of employee, and struggling for living conditions in line with its historically constructed social essence. "Human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole."⁶⁵

In turn, reducing the question of reproduction to the question of production levels out and obfuscates the complex structuration of social and capitalist relations, and consequently, disregards global challenges, demands, and aspirations, which are always individual without ceasing to be social, profoundly political without ceasing to be intimate. This is exactly the node that allows for a figure of the "true life" to construct itself that isn't under the guise of an eternal and chimeric dream or of some exterior programme of infinite conflicts that involves us. Living better now, and living truly, is to struggle and to succeed in metabolising momentum into collective political power.

Translation by Solange Manche

65 Battacharya 2017, p.15

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The Interest of Breathing: Towards a Theory of Ecological Interest Formation

Bue Rübner Hansen

Abstract: The question of the interest of breathing is imposing itself, from COVID-19, over Black Lives Matter to the breathlessness of climate anxiety and economic stress. The question is of epochal importance. It was posed and immediately dismissed when the constitution of the capitalist world was established in the mid-17th century. Modern political philosophy, parliamentary politics, and the emergent capitalist world order were built on a gradual reduction of the interest of breathing to the breath of the individual. Today, as suffocation brings back the question of breath with urgency, calls for a “universal right to breathe” co-exist with perverse invocations of the right to breathe as a right to breathe maskless. Behind any claims of right lays an interest. So how can we think the interest of breathing today and historically? Under what conditions does the interest in breathing become an insurgent universality against a suffocating world, and how does it relate to the concrete universality of breath on an atmospheric scale? To answer such questions, we must elaborate a theory of the interest of breathing which is at once partisan and ecological.

Keywords: interest, breathing, ecology, conspiracy, class, commons, covid.

Suffocation is the suffering of the day. There is the stifling atmosphere of pandemic isolation, the breathlessness of anxiety, the stress of work, debt and unemployment. There is the literal suffocation of the lungs of COVID-patients slowly filling with fluid and of George Floyd, at the knee of a police officer. There is the orange sky over California, the grey smog over industrial belts across the world, the airborne pollutants of asthma and early death. There is the suffering of people who simply cannot take it anymore, who push back police with placards paraphrasing Fanon: “We revolt because we cannot breathe”.²

How dare we dream of breathing freely and well, of breathing together? How dare we not?

Until we lose it, breath expands and contracts thoughtlessly in our diaphragm, connecting us with photosynthetic life. We all need to breathe, and this need extends much beyond the human. In this moment of Black, human, planetary suffocation, it is no stretch to imagine a universal right to breathe, as Achille Mbembe has recently done.³ But what is such right, except the barest of need of the barest of life? Is

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1 Acknowledged or not, all writing draws on networks of thought and care. The foremost person in my network, and in both respects, is Manuela Zechner. Oliver Bugge Hunt provided useful editorial suggestions as to where I needed to weave the threads tighter.

2The actual quote, to which we will return, is more radical and more expansive.

3 Mbembe 2020.

breath a right or simply a fact? And if it is a right, who is to practice and enforce it against the processes and agents of suffocation?

The question of the interest of breathing is of epochal importance. It was posed when the constitution of the capitalist world was settled in the mid-17th century, and immediately dismissed. Modern political philosophy, parliamentary politics, and the emergent capitalist world order were built on a gradual reduction of the interest of breathing to the breath of the individual. Today, as suffocation brings back the question of breath with intense urgency, this reduction expresses itself in perverse invocations of the right to breathe: as a right to breathe maskless, even when it may risk others or oneself a “complete disruption of the lung architecture”.⁴ The anti-mask protests reveal the importance of specifying this right not as an abstract universality to which those rejecting masks and those needy of respirators may equally lay claim. Behind any claims of right lays an interest. So how can we think the *interest of breathing*?

Recovering the history of the interest to breathe opens a radical questioning of the order of interest that was constructed upon the basis of possessive individualism. It also invites us to think interest as a form of relationality, which is not reducible to the games of self-interested individuals or classes. Instead, we may explore under which conditions this interest becomes an insurgent universality against a suffocating world, as well as a concrete universality of breath on an atmospheric scale. In short, beyond and beneath any abstract universality, we must elaborate on the question of an interest of breathing which is at once *partisan and ecological*.

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1. Forgetting of the interest of breathing

“Where is there any bound or limit set” if elections are opened to “men who have *no interest but the interest of breathing*?” With this speech act, Oliver Cromwell summed up a philosophy of legitimate interest that remains with us today: if the interests of the merely breathing are taken into account, argued the general, the result is anarchy. So began the repression of the interest of breathing. To set the scene for Cromwell's dismissal of the political legitimacy of the right of breathing, we need to look at the meaning of interest in mid-17th Century England.

In the European Renaissance, the concept of interest had two precise, technical meanings in law and moneylending. In law, interest referred to those that had a direct stake in court cases, so that most social actors could be described as having no interest at all. In its pecuniary sense, interest medieval referred to a compensation upon unpaid loans in medieval times, and then, as the moral and religious

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4 Booth 2020.

rejection of usury waned, to payments upon the loan itself. Interest referred to in-between (inter-esse), to the reality of relation beyond the agents or points in time constituting it: a legal contract or the value of time between a loan and its repayment.

The general crisis of the 17th century, threw the established understanding of interest into debate and crisis.⁵ In so far as this crisis was of epochal importance in shaping the world of today, we may speak of an Age of Separation: Civil war tore apart England along religious and class lines. The historian Christopher Hill spoke of this revolutionary era as a “great overturning, questioning, revaluing, of everything in England”.⁶ Feudal bonds between lords and their subjects were torn apart, and commoners from the commons. The enclosures and increased trade with colonies and Europe accelerated the commodification of labour and the commodification of the means of subsistence. Meanwhile, the agrarian base of the economy was rocked by the bad harvests of what has later been called “the Little Ice Age”.⁷ There was a general crisis of social bonds and the legal regulation of interests. Rumour of puritan conspiracies and papal plots were rife.⁸ Millenarianism provided a language for orientation in times where existing religious and worldly signifiers were destabilized. In the civil war, when the struggle was over legality in general - the constitution - and its relation to property, the very system that decided on who had a legitimate interest went into crisis. Accordingly, everyone could, at least potentially, and certainly if they commanded men under arms, claim an interest. Interest became what Raymond Williams describes as a keyword: significant, binding, or problematic words both in certain activities and their interpretation, and in certain forms of thought.⁹

In 1647, at the height of the English civil war, the rebels of the New Model Army met in a Church in Putney on the outskirts of London, to discuss a new constitution. The Levellers wanted near universal male suffrage, but grandees like Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton, Cromwell's son in law, refused an extension of the franchise to unpropertied men. “No man hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom”, wrote Ireton “that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom.” Interest was redoubled into a hierarchy of stakeholdership grounded on property: only property owners were recognized as having a fixed interest in the state, and so the right to an interest in its government.

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5 Parker 2013.

6 Hill 1991, p.14.

7 Parker 1993.

8 Milton 1995.

9 Williams 1988, p.15

In short, being a citizen, as opposed to a mere subject, was defined in terms of the possession of property - first of all the possession of land, rather than inhabitation of the land. Those without such interests were not considered disinterested, but of interests both too insignificant and too capacious to be counted. Only the propertied could be counted upon to defend the property upon which the state depends: what was to stop the poor majority, if enfranchised, from expropriating all land and wealth, and thus destituting all hierarchies, introducing anarchy? Where Thomas Rainsborough argued that “the poorest hee that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest hee”, and thus has no obligation to a government that “he hath not had a voice to put Himself under”, Cromwell ascended to Ireton’s argument, and asked his famous question: “for where is there any bound or limit set if you take away this limit, that men that have no interest but the interest of breathing shall have no voice in elections?”¹⁰

Where Risborough affirmed the voice of the poor, Cromwell saw mere *breath* - the inarticulate passage of air from the lungs. But why did Cromwell refer to breath to dismiss the interests of the multitude, rather than their “base” interests in eating and drinking, by which the poor have so often been dismissed? While we cannot reconstruct Cromwell’s intentions, we know that breath was considered altogether less ignoble than the consumption of food and drink, even spiritual. The connection between life, breath and spirituality was well known among theologians and others educated in Greek, Hebrew and Latin, all languages in which the words for breath and soul - *anima, spiritus, ruarch* - are the same or closely related.¹¹ For some radical protestants, like the Scottish Presbyterian and constitutionalist Samuel Rutherford, breathing was an act of praying, present even in those without eyes to turn to the sky or a voice to speak: “There is life going in and out at thy nostrils: Breathing is praying, and taken of our hand, as crying in prayer. Thou hast heard my voice, hide not thy ear at my breathing, at my cry”.¹²

The New Model Army was, to a large extent, composed of deeply religious men, and it counted among its forces and constituents many without property. In this company, the well-known dismissal of the masses’ base interests in eating and drinking would have been offensive and self-defeating — and recalled an uncomfortable fact: many did fight not

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10 Baker 2007.

11 Pseudo-Plutach credits to Anaximenes for building a philosophy around this connection: “Just as our soul, which is air, holds us together, so also a spirit (pneuma) and air hold the whole world together. Spirit and air have the same meaning”. Fragment found in Friedrich Engels’ notes and fragments for the *Dialectics of Nature*. Marxists.org.
The connection between breath and spirit was not just religious, but scientific, disrespecting modern distinctions between the realms. For instance, Aristotle’s discussion in *De Anima* about whether fish have a soul since they “do not breathe”, was still alive at the time. See Alexander Ross’s chapter on “the strange nature of fishes/they breathe not” in Ross 1652, p. 212.

12 Rutherford 1645, p.41

(merely) for religion, but for bread. Cromwell’s dismissal of the interest of breathing thus achieved a triple feat: it acknowledged the piousness of his interlocutors, which bound them to the uprising Cromwell was leading, while obscuring the issue of the voice and material interest of the poor. Yet this bond, while necessary in the struggle against monarchy, was also a threat to the interests of the Grandees. As Clinical Wasteman notes, every successful bourgeois power since the 1640s has followed the example of Cromwell’s Major-Generals in taking the merely-breathing interest seriously enough to plan some combination of its repression, division and corruption in advance.¹³

The reason the merely-breathing were to be taken seriously related to two excesses of breath, spiritual and bodily: the threat of millenarian fanaticism, and the threat of the insurrection of bare life.

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2. Interest unbound

In a break from the debates at Putney, there was time to listen to a sermon. The Baptist preacher Thomas Collier announced the coming rule of the saints, which entailed a freeing of conscience from the established church and of justice from government: a revolution both inner and outer. The aim was to impose the “great interest of God, the public good” so that “justice and righteousness may flow down abundantly without respect of persons.” As noted by Stephen Engelmann, this conception of interest “links the interior of the individual to a global project that can just as easily be posed against as with the ruling apparatus of state”, without being limited by law, neither natural, constitutional, nor common.¹⁴ For these millenarians, decisions were not to be based on scripture alone, but on the seizure of eschatological time. Under exceptional and pressing circumstances, “God’s commands may be intermittent, unprecedented, even unreasonable ...” and always to be interpreted by the conscience and strategy of the collective of saints.¹⁵ A decade later, the royalist pamphleteer Sir Roger D’Estrange who had made his name railing against “dissenting fanatics”, warned:

Take heed to such puritans, very pests in the church and commonwealth, whom no deserts can oblige, neither others nor promises bind; breathing nothing but sedition, and calumnies, aspiring without reason, and making their own imaginations (without any warrant of the word).¹⁶

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13 Wasteman 2012.

14 Engelmann 2003 p.127.

15 Engelmann 2003, p.134.

16 D’Estrange 1662, p.116.

D'Estrange points to the key challenge of Millenarianism: the unbounded nature of its passions. His distinction between the imagination of the diggers and the word, served to sever the essential tie between imagination and word in the Millenarian self-understanding. With all social and religious order upended, the word had to be read imaginatively, and the imagination had to be guided by the word, which, after all, had first opened a caesura in English society, as politico-theological dissent led to civil war. Living in a messianic rupture of time, which needed to be kept open at all costs, their faith was in the word, in as much as it kept open the Event. Any attention to the Book was guided by an extreme attention to signs and the revolutionary awareness that all that is said and done matters. Ultimately, the aim of the saints would be to establish “great interest of God, the public good”.¹⁷

The real threat of the breath of sedition, to the Grandees, lay in its capacity to combine with the interests of the merely breathing. Cromwell's and Ireton's fought fiercely against the extension of citizenship to the unpropertied, because they feared this would entail an admission that they have “freedom to the land, [to take] the ground, to exercise it, till it”. Indeed, even if the vote was never extended to the propertyless, some took matters into their own hands. In 1649, at St. George's Hill in Surrey, a loose movement which called itself the True Levellers, began digging where they were. Landless peasants reduced to utter misery by civil war and the meagre harvests of the cold 1640s, the diggers lived at the threshold of bare life. They did not and could not rest content to demand representation for the breathing. Indeed, they engaged in forms of mutual aid and squatted the land to re-establish what they had never had or what had been taken from them through the enclosures: Land for subsistence farming, and so a living relation with plants and animals, the seasons and nutrient cycles, a metabolism in nature which was not, or only marginally, mediated with the world of property and property right, and processes of production and conquest. Common among the Diggers and other millenarian groups at the time, like the Ranters, the Familiarists and the Quakers, was a belief in the equality of the sexes; some even believed in sexual freedom outside marriage.

In such struggles we find the opening to a notion of interest beyond property and contract. For Cromwell and Ireton interest referred to, in Raymond Williams' useful distillation, “an objective or legal share of something, and the extended use, to refer to a natural share or common concern”.¹⁸ This definition of interest drew on the narrow financial and legal concepts of interest, but the words' Latin root— *inter-esse* — allowed its extension to a much broader semantic field: “to be between”,

17 Woodhouse 1986, p. 50.

18 Williams 1988, p.15.

“to make a difference”, and “to concern”. Indeed, the land the Diggers took an interest in was itself interstitial: the fallow lands between the fertile fields of the lords, the commons that existed between popular use and lordly dominion. “Oppressing lords of manors, exacting landlords and tithe-takers”, wrote the digger leader Gerrald Winstanley, “may as well say their brethren shall not breathe in the air, nor enjoy warmth in their bodies, nor have the moist waters to fall upon them in showers, unless they will pay them rent for it...”.¹⁹ The problem for Winstanley and his co-conspirators wasn't just rents, but private property itself:

...so long as we, or any other, doth own the Earth to be the peculiar Interest of Lords and Landlords, and not common to others as well as them, we own the Curse, and holds the Creation under bondage.²⁰

For the diggers, the freedom of mankind and of the Earth were mutually dependent, in a continuous sensuous communion:

And when this tree of life is fed upon and delighted in (by the five senses, which is the creation, mankind, or the living soul), then these five rivers are called pure rivers of the waters of life; for the life of truth and peace is in them, and they are the sweet conveyors of the waters or breathings of life from one to another through the whole body; and so bringing all into a oneness, to be of one heart and one mind.²¹

The Diggers' interest in the land isn't possessive, as much as a caring concern. The care is articulated in terms of a spiritualization of nature, a proto-ecological spirituality. For Winstanley, God is Tree of Life whose “waters and breathings” pass through the five senses. *Deus, sive natura*. The connection between breath and the spiritualization of nature is historically profound. Speculating about the origins of religion, Freud ascribed great importance to the etymological connection between breath and spirit:

Man found that he was faced with the acceptance of "spiritual" forces, that is to say such forces as cannot be comprehended by the senses, particularly not by sight, and yet having undoubted, even extremely strong, effects. If we may trust to language, it was the movement of the air that provided the image of spirituality, since the spirit borrows its name from the breath of wind (animus, spiritus,

19 Winstanley 2009, p.295, language modernised.

20 Winstanley 1983, p. 84

21 Winstanley 2009, p.7

Hebrew: ruach = smoke). The idea of the soul was thus born as the spiritual principle in the individual...Now the realm of spirits had opened for man, and he was ready to endow everything in nature with the soul he had discovered in himself.²²

The Diggers were not animists, but animism shares with pantheism a crucial trait, which it appears Freud overlooked. The discovery of spirit/breath in nature, is also a discovery of nature in us as living breathing creatures. This isn't merely a matter of adding "introjection" to Freud's thesis of projection. The relation is not specular, but a matter of inhalation and exhalation. It is a matter both of spirit and matter, whose unity is *life*.

To know the secrets of nature is to know the works of God ... how the spirit or power of wisdom and life, causing motion or growth, dwells within and governs both the several bodies of the stars and planets in the heavens above; and the several bodies of the earth below, as grass, plants, fishes, beasts, birds and mankind.²³

Spirit isn't inherent in the individual, or rather, it only inheres in the individual insofar as it circulates between it and creatures of all kinds (including, crucially, as we now know, plants) via a common atmosphere. For Winstanley, the communion of man and nature doesn't efface the distinction but thinks their higher unity not only in terms of origin or author (both are "God's creation"), but as sensuous exchange. In this exchange, breath does not stand out, piously and humbly, from eating and drinking. Instead of the voiceless piety of bare life, it is a struggle against the institutions that block the material and spiritual relation with the Tree of Life: private property, established religion and the state. Indeed, the Diggers' weaving of networks of interdependence reminds us that life is rarely bare, except from the point of view of the state. The interests emerging from these networks were interstitial and unbounded, widening, fanatically, the cracks in the edifice of law, and repairing, ecologically, the tears in the web of life.

In ruling class discourse, the threat posed by the Diggers and other radicals to the order of private and public interest wasn't just a local, English phenomenon. As the historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown, the English grantees saw the diggers as a part of a transnational "Hydra", the mythological many-headed beast who grows a new head whenever one is chopped off. Across the growing empire, the

22 Sigmund Freud, 1939. In Arabic too, a similar connection between spirit and air is made. The arabic for spirit, *روح* (*rūḥ*), shares its etymology with the word for wind, *rīḥ*.

23 Winstanley 2009, p. 324-325

Hydra would rear its heads, engaging in struggles for land and breath.²⁴
Refusing private property and the state, and practicing subsistence commoning and religious communion, the diggers rejected everything about the emergent ideology of possessive individualism, which became hegemonic after this age of separation. The diggers were soon crushed militarily, their ideas repressed by censorship, their potential followers discouraged by their demonization. Soon corruption was added to the repression and division of the interest of the merely breathing.

...

3. Possessive individualism

After Putney, the civil war ran its course, culminating in the execution of King Charles I in January 1649. The parliamentary victory established a Commonwealth under the leadership of Cromwell. Suffrage wasn't extended to the propertyless, but Leveller demands such as the abolition of monarchy and the Church of England's monopoly of religion were followed. Cromwell did not run the risks of demobilizing his radicalized army, deploying instead the New Model Army in the subjugation of Ireland. Soldiers from the army were thus offered a way to gain land, which did not threaten the English elite, but rather supported its colonial ambitions under Cromwell's ruthless leadership. Meanwhile enclosures continued in England, not merely as elite land-grabs, but to ensure a sufficient population of "productive" workers.²⁵

As slavery became central to English empire-building, an old Roman republican concept of freedom started to (re)gain prominence. No longer was the free individual based merely on the freedom from the "dependency" under which women and children suffered, but also from the non-freedom of slaves. Free men were thought to be dependent on and owned by no-one but themselves. Their *possessive individualism* was, pace Macpherson, aristocratic and agrarian, rather than bourgeois. The model individual for this mode of thought wasn't so much the individualized market actor, as the protestant patriarch, whose relationship to God had been individualized.²⁶ Throughout, self-interest wasn't found anthropologically and universally, but imbued institutionally and particularly to certain subjects, through contract and property law. Cromwell and Ireton had grounded the franchise — a legitimate interest in government — on the ownership of immovable property in England. However, as colonialism, industrialism and world trade increased the

24 Linebaugh and Rediker 2000.

25 S. Fortrey, *England's Interest and Improvement* (1663), pp. 19- 20; Referenced in Hill 1991, p.51.

26 As Carole Pateman has noted, the "independence" of the contractarian, possessive individual typically obscures relations of interdependence and domination within the household. Nowhere is this clearer than in case of the Aristocratic patriarch. Pateman 1988.

power of the bourgeoisie, and of aristocrats who invested or married into commerce and industry, the respect for movable property grew. In short, it became imaginable that also merchants and industrialists without landed property could have a legitimate interest claim on the vote. Definitions and distinctions between interests grounded in property and breathing, in fixed and moveable property, etc., didn't just discriminate between pre-established interests, but encouraged the formation of some interests over others.

With the dismissal of the unbounded interests of eschatologists and the dispossessed, it may be surprising that the capitalist pursuit of profit - which we know to entail a bad infinity - was not equally rejected among the puritan elites of Britain. The reason for this was that commerce and production were seen as essentially self-restrained activities, requiring hard work and frugality. As interest was gradually individualized, it became connected to proto-psychological theories of passions and affects, something that had been unthinkable when interest was a legal term for having a stake in a relation.

As Albert Hirschman has shown in his seminal intellectual history, *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), philosophers from Hume to Adam Smith called upon the concept of interest to provide a materialist theory of the overcoming of the private vices in the absence of religious prohibitions.²⁷ Already Spinoza had written that "[a]n affect cannot be restrained nor removed unless by an opposed and stronger affect", affirming a basic materialist insight: knowledge alone is not enough to transform behaviour: "No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered an affect".²⁸ Hume similarly affirmed that "There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction". The name of the affect capable of restraining or orientating other passions is *interest*. While focus was on the constraint of harmful passions – the vices – in 17th century philosophy the term generally includes what we may call affects (joy, sadness, fear, anxiety, hope), and motivations (need, desires, want).

What marks out interest from other passions is its in-betweenness: it is not pure need, want or desire, but the articulation of such motivations in relations to others in consideration of an ensemble of social relations upon which the individual is dependent (morality, legality, the fluctuations of the market, etc.). According to Hirschman, the concept of interest understood as "concerns, aspirations, and advantage" gained currency in late 17th century Western Europe, with a meaning not limited by person's welfare, but comprising "the totality of human aspirations",

27 Albert O. Hirschman 1977

28 Spinoza 1699, p.185, prop VII and XIV

while denoting "an element of reflection and calculation with respect to the manner in which these aspirations were to be pursued".²⁹ Interest, we may say, became the name of this orientation, at once practical and theoretical, between an individuated life and the relations within which it is lived.

In his study of Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of interest, Stephen Engelmann points to the importance of institutions, *experience* and *expectation* in orientating and limiting interest.³⁰ The subject cannot be said to have an interest, in something that neither experience nor expectation suggest the possibility of (some may dream of settling other planets, but can't be a matter of interest unless the scientific possibility of doing so emerges). Our experiences are profoundly shaped by the ways we reproduce ourselves, saturated with family history, work-life and interactions with the state, just as expectations are shaped by our beliefs in anything from progress or climate change to fear or trust in the police. In short, interests are not brute facts inherent in the subject or in its position within economic relations. They are an emergent orientation guided by experience and expectation, navigating between passions (or affects), on the one hand, and the institutions, events, relations and ideologies which shape experience and expectation, and reward or punish passions, on the other. Interests, in other words, while different from needs and desires are no pure calculative rationality, but a reflexive passion shaped by the forms of production, politics and thought in which the subject exists. But the existence of the individual subject is itself a contingent and contested historical phenomenon, and this is where the question of collective interest formation arises.

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4. The breath of the working class

The Diggers, as a simultaneously proletarian and anti-proletarianization movement, had developed a strong interest of breathing. In the apocalyptic atmosphere of the Civil War, the Diggers emerged as a combination of a Millenarian orientation and expectation and squatting as a material strategy of life and survival based on its participants' agrarian experiences. They formed, we may say, an interest in breathing that was both spiritual and material. However, the history of the workers movement may be narrated as a forgetting of the interest of breathing.

Already a generation after the Diggers, John Locke developed a theory of property based in labour.³¹ Extending the circle of possessions

29 Hirschman 1977, p.32

30 Engelmann 2003, p.4

31 Locke 1689.

that may ground citizenship to taxpayers in general, he created an opening for free workers to claim a stake in the state; the price of “possessing their own labour power” was their taxability. In this way, workers could be imagined as members of the civil society, that is of market individuality, and be treated, in their own humble way, as possessive individuals. While the working class in England was profoundly international and most of all *transatlantic*, a large part of the working class was increasingly nationalized as English. In short, the institutional and expectational horizon of its interest formation was increasingly national not only at home, but in the colonies. For centuries, the colonies provided the propertyless English a path, however perilous, to private property and so to precarious forms of settler colonial citizenship. Writing 170 years later, Hegel noted that colonial conquest provided an essential solution to the problem of the rabble. Unlike other ways of dealing with the problem of the dispossessed which all were contrary to “the principles of civil society” - self-help, independence, hard work, etc. - the export of the propertyless to the colonies would instead expand the reach of civil society, and the circle of possessive individuals.

With regards to the large working class that remained in Britain, Marx and Engels’ were painfully aware of its suffocation. For Engels, the breathless, suffocated masses posed a deep blockage to the nationalization of the working class. In this study on the condition of the English working class, Engels frequently returned to the question of breath. There were the bleachers who were obliged to breathe chlorine, the young women workers, who suffered “coughs, narrow chests, and shortness of breath”, “enervation, exhaustion, debility, loss of appetite, pains in the shoulders, back, and hips, but especially headache”.³² There were the fourteen-year-old grinders suffering from asthma, who, in the words of one doctor quoted by Engels,

appear to breathe the most comfortably in that posture in which they are accustomed to sit at their work. Their complexions assume a muddy, dirty appearance; their countenance indicates anxiety; they complain of a sense of tightness across the chest; their voice is rough, and hoarse; their cough loud, and as if the air were drawn through wooden tubes; they occasionally expectorate considerable quantities of dust, sometimes mixed up with mucus, at other times in globular or cylindrical masses enveloped in a thin film of mucus.³³

For Engels, Manchester, the leading city of industrialism, illustrated the extreme capacity of the human organism to endure suffocation. The city

32 All quotes from the digital version of *The Condition of the English Working Class* found at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/>.

33 Ibid.

showed in how little space a human can move and “how little air – and such air! – he can breathe”. Engels referred not to Manchester in general, but to the quarters on the east and north-east of the city, in which the bourgeoisie did not live, since the prevalent western and south-western “wind drives the smoke of all the factories hither”, for the working people to breathe. The atmospheric suffering of the “multitude of the poor”, “a race ... robbed of all humanity”, wasn’t just inscribed in urban geography, but in the built environment:

They are drawn into the large cities where they breathe a poorer atmosphere than in the country; they are relegated to districts which, by reason of the method of construction, are worse ventilated than any others ... As though the vitiated atmosphere of the streets were not enough, they are penned in dozens into single rooms, so that the air which they breathe at night is enough in itself to stifle them. They are given damp dwellings, cellar dens that are not waterproof from below or garrets that leak from above.³⁴

Yes, breathing was a need. But as a demand, it was rarely raised. The reason, we may gather is that it this would have required a leap of working-class capacities, a process of collective interest formation on a scale appropriate to the problem. Individual workers do need fresh air and may actively pursue this as an interest when they look for work or housing. However, such behaviour amounts to little less than workers competing for decent conditions of life. More generally, we can say that while there may be universal human needs, this does not imply that there are universal human interests: people who need the same may compete over it, rather than form a common interest. The universal need to breathe has no direct relation to the interest of breathing, except as a near-tautology on the level of the individual: it needs to breathe, so it has an interest in conditions that allow it to do so.³⁵ To connect need (or desire or “passions”) to interest requires a theory of *interest formation*.³⁶ Even a shared problem of suffocation may not lead to a common interest. For the coincidence of needs to result in a common interest there has to be mechanisms of overcoming scarcity: practices of sharing and mechanisms of redistribution, or economic trajectories of growth or forms of collectively reappropriating wealth, which project the overcoming of overcoming of scarcity. In short, collective interests need to be based on collective experiences or expectations that the

34 Ibid.

35 But even here, interest and need are not the same. A suicidal person may need to breathe, but have no interest in doing so.

36 For an elaboration of the question of interest formation, see Hansen 2015.

needs/desires/passions of different individuals or groups can be aligned. In short, to form a collective interest, individuals need either to trust institutions or themselves.

The development of a Mancunian class interest in breathing required an expectation that the air and dwellings of Manchester could be changed for the whole class, which required trust in institutions' willingness and capacity to do this (making petitions etc. meaningful), or in the workers' own revolutionary capacity to enact a vast scale transformation of industry, of labour, of the city and housing. Engels had great confidence in this latter scenario, imagining the working-class as a people onto their own which had "become a race wholly apart from the English bourgeoisie". In other words, Engels thought the degradation of the working class was akin to a process of racialization, which may result in open class/race warfare.³⁷

Sensing this danger all too well, and troubled by the physical weakness of even young workers and army conscripts, social reformers and philanthropists undertook the work of improving the living conditions and air quality of the working class. The expectation that institutions and social progress would gradually respond to the need of fresh air – paired with the belief that some degree of pollution was a condition of progress -- gradually depoliticised the question of air quality, taking it outside the scope of articulated collective interests, just as the welfare state itself slowly transformed the struggle for collective interests into a regime of institutionally guaranteed universal and individual citizenship rights. In his classical text on social citizenship, T.H. Marshall drew an analogy between the welfare state's gradual, but never complete elimination of air pollution and class difference:

And so in time, as the social conscience stirs to life, class-abatement, like smoke-abatement, becomes a desirable aim to be pursued as far as is compatible with the continued efficiency of the social machine.³⁸

Thus, in the imaginary of the reformer, the suffocation of working class life is remedied, but never abolished, by a "social conscience" rather than struggle. This forgetting of the collective interest of breathing has had profound consequences on working class subjectivities. This produced a class of workers possessive of rights, and perhaps of savings and humble apartments and houses, but without collective interest in questions of social and natural ecologies. The workers movement increasingly limited its demand to those which could be satisfied by mechanisms of

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³⁷ For a discussion of the strange use of the concept of race, see Kouvelakis 2004, p. 207-211.

³⁸ Marshall 1950, p.32.

money and citizenship, guided by the expectational machine of progress. Compared to the fights for higher wages, the 8-hour working day, for holidays and welfare rights, the struggles for breath (for public health, parks and dignified housing, etc.) isn't remembered much, and mostly as a story of modernization. Across Western Europe, the working class was nationalized into forms of stakeholdership, and made respectable to the extent it joined the ranks of those whose passions were guided by interest. Class demands became premised on citizenship and indexed to the growth of the wealth of the nation, whatever its ecological costs or (neo)colonial means.

...

5. Breathing, leisurely

The interest of breathing was largely forgotten in the metropolis. The consequence has been an impoverishment of the concept of interest. Interest has come to be characterized by the tactical and strategic orientation of any individuated multiplicity - a person, a family, a corporation, a nation - in obtaining and controlling specific objects and objectives. Interest has been reduced to self-interest.³⁹ That this is the case within liberal and conservative traditions is obvious. But this was also often the case on the left. Not only within reformist workers movements, as mentioned above, but in the revolutionary movements who pursued the insurrection of the merely breathing - of the dispossessed, the rabble, the proletariat, surplus population – with the aim to socialize rather than abolish property. Too often, the Utopian horizon was the individuation of humanity as a possessive individual, in an ideology of progress the aim of which wasn't to overcome the bad infinity of capitalist accumulation, but to liberate it from the shackles of merely private property.

Among all these traditions of 20th century Western politics – liberalism, conservatism, social democracy and socialism, the concept of freedom remained the one that was forged in the age of separation. Its positive definition in terms of independence and sovereignty, be it individual or national, carried the mark of the forms of unfreedom it was defined against: the patriarchal dependency of women and children, the dependency of subsistence farmers on nature, and the unfreedom of enslaved Africans. The ethics, politics and epistemologies connected, rightly or wrongly, with blackness and subsistence farming, childhood and womanhood (animism, play, care, etc.) were cast as other not just to freedom but to the regime of rationality built up around the concept of interest. Practices and rationalities of caring for interdependencies within social and natural ecologies were cast as other to the grand project of Progress, even if they continued to subsidize and supply this

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³⁹ Swedberg 2005. Mathiowetz 2007.

project with energy, raw materials, and cheap labour.⁴⁰

As other, all these practices could return in the romanticized form that is inescapable when such practices are described rather than lived. Rather than the troubles and joys, labour, and daily struggles of taking care of interdependencies, we got fantasies of noble savages, infinitely caring mothers and innocent children. With regards to nature, we find not the difficulties and joys of joint metabolism — composting, planting, weeding, watering, foraging, hunting and caring for animals, and so on, but a romantic description of nature as a beautiful other (but even here the breath of nature reaches out, almost erotically, to touch and enter the subject):

I experienced the same blissful thrill, it was like a breath of fresh sea air blowing down upon me from the purest sky; the depths of speculation lay before me like the unfathomable sea from which one cannot turn one's eyes straining to see the ground below; in God we live, move and have our being! We become conscious of that when we are on the sea; we feel that God breathes through all around us and through us ourselves; we feel such kinship with the whole of nature, the waves beckon to us so intimately, the sky stretches so lovingly over the earth, and the sun shines with such indescribable radiance that one feels one could grasp it with the hand.⁴¹

Breath became reduced to a basic bodily function, or to the luxury of vacations by the sea, in the mountains and by lakes, all of which slowly trickled down to the worker-citizens. Eastern practices of breathing like yoga and meditation were imported as self-improvement exercises, shorn of their collective spiritual dimension. Pantheism became a matter of the holiday epiphanies of hikers and campers, swimmers and surfers. The interest of breathing became an interest in leisure, in parks and travels to “exotic” destinations, and one that could be satisfied through the key mechanisms of interest-as-possession and rights: the ownership of money or holiday homes for some, the rights of workers and citizens to paid holiday for others.

And so, slowly, freedom was reduced to self-possession (of money, property, and rights). Interest was reduced to the interest of the self and nation, breath to an aspect of the individual body, and nature to an environment to be conquered or conserved. The subject that emerged from this violent and contested historical process was not the individual suddenly recognized as free and independent. Instead, as we have seen, it was a body individualized and separated by the state and market, a

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40 Moore 2016.

41 Engels 1840.

possessive and acquisitive interest premised on the domination of its passions. Psychoanalysis built a whole psychology and business model on helping this Ego navigate the contrary pressures of the Superego and Id. This was to be an uneasy, anxious subject. Either it would betray its own desires or the social norms regulating the behaviour of individuals. Whatever it chose, it would be guilty, only differently.

Individual freedom had become a matter of an anxious, mostly unconscious choice between different forms of guilt. Kierkegaard called this choice *the abyss*, the moment of facing freedom and possibility (or desire, as Lacan would say⁴²), where the subject either leaps or turns away, shuddering.⁴³ The severance of Godly, lordly and patriarchal dependency had left the subject seemingly alone with its possessions and anxiety. What disappeared from view was any interdependencies and desires that did not take the forms imaginable and acceptable to possessive individualism, in other words all those interdependencies and desires that were not mediated by contracts between legal persons, such as the marriage contract, the labour contract, the commercial contract, the rental contract, the social contract, and, for some, the Godly covenant. Today, as the question of the interest of breathing has re-emerged with great urgency, this refusal to affirm the interdependencies of collective breathing reveals its violence and stupidity in the anti-mask protests.

...

6. My body, my breath

In the pandemic, our efforts to stay breathing and avoid respirators, is very much a matter of thinking ecologically. Within the logics of potentially exponential contagion, and our global networks of interdependency, the health of one is the health of all. We must avoid breathing together, so that we may all breathe. But many fight the masks and the physical distance required to stop contagion. They do so, not in the name of breathing together, but in defence of their individual right to breathe freely. As a sign of a woman at a protest: “My body, my choice”.

The perhaps most frequent complaint of the anti-mask protesters — a strange assortment of conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists and small business owners eager to force their workers back to work — is related to breath. In a viral clip from a demonstration in Utah demonstrators rejected the existence of asymptomatic carriers and chanted “no more masks! No more masks!”. A male donned a t-shirt at once mocking and adopting the language of identity politics: “I identify as a fresh air breather”, while a woman in her mid-40s seemed both sincere

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42 Lacan 2014, p. 189

43 Kierkegaard 1980, p.61

and trolling when she said:

George Floyd was saying 'I can't breathe' and then he died. And now we're wearing a mask and we say "I can't breathe", but we're being forced to wear it anyways.

At a similar protest in Berlin a man demanded a "return to democracy" against "the masks that make us slaves". Protesters in Austin, Texas, marched to the chant of "we can't breathe!". At an anti-mask protest in Madrid, this contemporary black liberation slogan was rendered "*queremos respirar!*" — we want to breathe.

When the anti-mask protesters dress up in discursive black face and faux feminism, they reveal the implicit power of radical discourse. But the right's co-optation of the slogans and signifiers of emancipatory movements presupposes that these terms speak to the constituencies of the right. If breathing and suffocation work cross-politically as metaphors of freedom and oppression, it is because they have an affective resonance beyond the fascination of the movements who first make those claims. Anti-mask protesters may be lying, bullshitting, and trolling, sometimes self-consciously so, but their manipulations attempt to address, and perhaps express, experiences of breathlessness and suffocation. As somatic expressions of anxiety and stress, troubled breathing is no doubt ubiquitous today, also among those who oppose liberatory movements and public health measures.

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7. Individualism and conspiracism

The last decade has accelerated the decline of stakeholder society into the middle classes. Insecurity of incomes from salaries and small businesses, has increased along with indebtedness. There has been an epic real estate crash and a hollowing out of social citizenship, American hegemony, GDP growth and the belief in progress itself are in doubt. All this has created a deepening mismatch between experiences and expectations, or perhaps better: it has made experience-based expectations increasingly precarious. In short, a disorientating rift in the navigation of self-interest has emerged. The product of this insecurity and disorientation has been a profound rise in stress and anxiety. The turn to meditation and mindfulness, and the proliferating selection of self-help guides for dealing with shortness of breath are not surprising in this context.

In the face of anxiety, phobia attempts to stabilize meaning. It may rationalize the anxiety by projecting sinister interests or perverse, corrosive desires onto others. The mask serves as a metonym of such interests and desires. Sometimes it is presented as a malevolent deep

state plot against democracy and at others, or simultaneously, as a conspiracy against "free speech" led by transsexuals, feminists, and Cultural Marxists. Rather than face the inconsistency of the symbolic order itself, it can now be defended. An interest is established, an interest in avoiding or defeating the mask, and fighting those who desire it. Thus, contemporary conspiracism may, at least partially, be understood as psychic responses to anxiety in the crisis of stakeholder interest.

On this point, it's important to distinguish our analysis from Richard Hoefstaedter's 1964 argument about "the paranoid style of American politics", which is frequently used today to analyse Trumpism and contemporary conspiracy theories.⁴⁴ Hoefstaedter, who admitted to a broadened and polemical use of the concept, did not relate paranoia to milder psychic states such as fear and phobia, nor did he explain it as a psychic response to anxiety. Instead, in good liberal fashion, he described paranoia as an effect of millenarian megalomania, in short of *fanaticism*. But this critique begs the question: if paranoia is a product of fanaticism, what explains the attractions of fanaticism? Moreover, are there not situations of absolute injustice in which radical political commitment -- "fanaticism" -- might be called for?⁴⁵ Finally, Hoefstaedter's total dismissal of conspiracy theories represses the fact that real conspiracies do exist. Its publication in the aftermath of the murder of John F. Kennedy, and its recurrent return to popularity every time the United States has been shocked by a *real conspiracy*, might tell us something about the ideological functions of his argument.⁴⁶

If, on the other hand, we understand the affective and ideological atmosphere of the anti-mask protests in terms of anxiety, we understand the problem not merely as one of opposed ideologies - one sensible and rational, the other fanatic - but as relating to the deeper crises/desires that give rise to anxiety, by challenging the symbolic order with events, problems and antagonisms it cannot represent, and so with its own contingency. In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan made clear that anxiety, as an affect, is not repressed. What is repressed are the signifiers that might moor it.⁴⁷ Thus between the real and symbolization, anxiety can be thought from two sides: The trauma or desire that brings signification into crisis, or the incapacity of signification and practice to deal with them.

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⁴⁴ Hofstadter 1964.

⁴⁵ For a critique of the concept of fanaticism in political thought, see Toscano 2010.

⁴⁶ Google Ngrams, which counts how often a word or phrase has been used in Google's digitalized text corpus, shows a market uptick in the phrase in 1973 (Watergate Scandal), 1986 (Iran Contra), and 2001 (September 11).

⁴⁷ Lacan 2014, p. 14

8. The ideology of possessive individualism

The anti-mask protests may best be understood as an symbolic failure to deal with the real catastrophe of the pandemic, provoking a sometimes breathless anxiety that finds its unstable resolution in the rejection of the mask, as a literal object of suffocation as well as a metonym of the perceived oppressiveness of the social order that prescribes it. The precise reason that covid-19 causes such phobic expressions of anxiety, is that anti-mask protesters exist within a symbolic order that cannot think the networked, invisible pathways of contagion. More precisely, the anti-mask protests cannot be understood without attending to the ideological form of possessive individualism.

With form, I refer to the structural isomorphism of the different aspects of possessive individualism as ideology: as a system of beliefs and knowledges, as inscribed into material institutions (property law, the regulation of citizenship, etc.), and as an apparently “non-ideological” everyday practice of individuals “going about their business”.⁴⁸ As belief, institutionality and everyday practice, possessive individualism allows individuals to imagine and orientate themselves as self-interested, independent, separate from others. Pragmatically speaking, from the point of view of certain subjects (property owning male citizens), possessive individualism is an indispensable mode of orientation in the age of separation, so much so that a whole pedagogy was built up around the figure of Robinson Crusoe.⁴⁹

In this ideology, knowledge of interdependencies is strictly reduced to a game of self-interests in the genre of commercial exchange. Ideas, knowledges and affects, are described as something one “has”, rather than as something that either contributes to or challenges the individuation of the self. For the possessive individualist, one either “possesses” objects and beliefs - perhaps in joint ownership with one’s family, community, or nation — in which case they are no threat to one’s independence, but rather its extension and guarantee. If not, or objects and knowledges are “possessed” by others, in which case they are a threat. Characteristic of this ideology is a combination of naive empiricism and faith in what one already believes. This is a kind of truncated and twisted Spinozism, in which there is no nature/God, but only the embrace of the ideas that bring joy and a refusal of those that

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⁴⁸ I am extending the argument in Žižek’s essay “The Spectre of Ideology”, in *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, 1994. These distinctions broadly correspond to three Marxist theories of ideology as “false consciousness”, “ideological state apparatuses” and “commodity fetishism”. These are matters of ideology and not just of subjectivity, in so far as they participate in the reproduction of a wider social order. However, rather than uphold an “objective”, “scientific” standpoint from which ideology can be judged, I posit two extra-ideological standpoints within ideology itself: first, it’s constitutive problem (for possessive individualism, legitimating self-interest and orientating separated subjects), and second, it’s constitutive exclusion (the repression of interdependency).

⁴⁹ Hansen 2018.

bring sadness. “I only believe what I see with my own eyes” mingles easily with belief in conspiracy theories, nationalism, pseudo-science, or religion. These beliefs function as imaginary supplements to the inconsistencies of naive empiricism. Beliefs in personal completion, or in communities of blood and identity compensate for the foreclosure of the thought of networked interdependencies.

We may say that possessive individualism is only capable of signifying systems through imaginaries of identity and completeness. Even those New Age anti-mask protestors who reject possessive individualism live in its shadow: with romantic ideas of natural harmony and personal wholeness. In either case, there is an incapacity to signify any constitutively incomplete system characterized by interdependencies, such as “atmospheres”, “ecologies” or “climates”, or of accepting their constitutive incompleteness. What is blocked is *ecological thought*.⁵⁰ The ideology of possessive individualism constitutes an epistemological and ontological obstacle to imagining and representing oppressive atmospheres, changing climates, faltering ecologies. In other words, it can only signify imaginary crises - of the nation, the family, etc. - and not real crisis. It cannot signify, indeed it must repress, any polymorphic perversions and queer desires that stir its unconscious, and any crisis that disturb identity.

The wearing of masks, which cannot be recognized as a matter of public health and mutual care, is transformed into a state infringement on the individual’s “right to breathe”. And so, the obscene comparison with the police murder of George Floyd becomes possible. Instead of structural racism, fever dreams of a conspiracy to suffocate good white law-abiding citizens. Instead of a struggle to unbind and multiply sexuality, kinship, and gender, it sees protesting perverts -- and a conspiracy to destroy the family. Instead of rising greenhouse gas concentrations, it sees weather or fire -- and “the climate hoax”. Instead of paths of viral transmission and relations of mutual care, it sees sick and healthy people — and oppressive lockdowns and “muzzles”. Instead of institutional racism it sees a specific knee on a specific neck — and a black, migrant and liberal conspiracy to bring down America or Western Civilization.

When it comes to the interest of breathing, the invisible-yet-real always returns, for there is always an atmosphere and an interdependence of breathing. So, the ostensibly empiricist ideology of possessive individualism has to imagine the breath of others as conspiracy. Those who do not respire with others see others conspire, and those who do not partake in the spirit, see spirits.

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⁵⁰ Fritjof Capra defines ecologies as networks of interdependence, not only of different life-forms dependent on one another, but also on material and energetic flows (nutrient cycles, water and carbon cycles, sunshine, etc.). Capra 1997, p. 11.

9. A single garment of destiny

While the ideology of possessive individualism is pervasive, it is not all. Discourses do exist that do not repress the signifiers needed to come to terms with disaster. Most people can symbolize covid-19 as a public health disaster resultant from the spread of SARS-CoV-2 particles by air and direct contact with contaminated surfaces. Most Black people in the United States can inscribe acts of police brutality within a wider cognitive mapping of the institutional character of American racialism. To more and more, forest fires, droughts and floods are incontrovertible symptoms of an unfolding climate emergency. Such signification enables a community of the affected. Instead of fear of the object, they worry about police brutality, public health ecology, or global warming. Worry opens to concern, and concern to care and struggle.

COVID-19 has taught us the interdependence of breath by making us fearful of breathing together. Just as we have to learn to think ecologically, we have to distance ourselves within our social ecologies. Thinking ecologically means understanding that the pandemic isn't just a matter of a dangerous object - the submicroscopic virus - but of the relations, exchanges of our everyday life, of our modes of inhabitation (density, proximity), of the organisation of worklife. As the leading German epidemiologist Christian Drosten explains, the foundational science of epidemiology is ecology.⁵¹ And finally, at the source of the pandemic, it means understanding our relations to other species and how the encroachment of dense, interconnected human ecologies upon stressed natural ecologies multiply the risks of zoonotic transfer of disease, with factory farms functioning as accelerators of viral evolution.⁵² COVID-19 teaches us the importance of our breathing-with-and-within social and natural ecologies, and constitutes, at the very same time, a blockage of breathing together, truly.

But many, untouched by solidarity outside kinship, find themselves in the scenario of the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan*: recognizing through crisis our interdependencies, we rush to the protection of a sovereign through which we may survive in-and-through our separation, the streets cleared by police and purified by plague doctors.⁵³ The pandemic reveals ecology as negativity, as conduits of contagion, and calls forth the anti-ecology of the state and social distancing as its apparent solutions. Anxiety, and its transformation into a game of fear and security, continues along.

Starting in late May 2020, an uprising swept across the United States after the police suffocation of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a storm

51 NDR Coronavirusupdate, <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/info/podcast4684.html>

52 Wallace 2020.

53 Poole 2020.

lasting into August. "I can't breathe", said George Floyd, echoing the last words of Eric Garner, Javier Ambler, Manuel Ellis, Elijah McClain, and we must imagine, the unheard thoughts of thousands in the Mediterranean. Most were killed for the victimless legal infringements needed to survive as surplus population. Garner was arrested for cigarettes without tax stamps, Floyd for allegedly passing on a counterfeit \$20 bill. Migrants for trying to cross into Europe while unpropertied non-citizens – which many do because they cannot breathe in the futureless stifling atmospheres of their home countries. The uprising after the killing of George Floyd quickly spread to Europe, showing the insurgent force of *black lives matter*, against the global colour line. It wasn't just individual people who were grasping for air, but thousands and thousands of Black people, disproportionately affected not just by police violence against the poor, but by Covid-19, living and working in cramped and stale environments, and then disproportionately thrown into unemployment by workplace closures, and evicted as insolvent.

The suffocation of colonialism, as the suffocation of Black people in the United States to which it gave birth to, is both literal and spiritual. It is an uprising of those whose life chances and freedom is choked, who suffer the breathlessness of oppression, poverty, and anxiety. Covid-19 reveals that the dwellings and workplaces of the poor still increase the risk of respiratory disease, as they did in the time of Engels.⁵⁴ This movement rebels against an anti-ecology which distributes suffocation downwards, and spacious quarantine homes upwards. Some rebel because they no longer expect anything from the system, others because they expect that riots can secure concessions – a confluence of realistic expectations.

The summer uprising, as many uprisings before it, made truth of Fanon's statement about anti-colonial uprisings in Indochina:

It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because "quite simply" it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe.⁵⁵

In the rhetorically sharpened version of the quote that normally circulates, there is a simple, implicitly black "we". Here, as in the French original, he speaks of the anti-colonial struggle in French Indochina, not as "other", but as part of the same, interdependent network of struggle to which the Martiniquan and adopted Algerian psychiatrist gave his life. Underlining the transversality of the struggle, he stresses that revolt does not arise out of the national culture of the oppressed, but out of a shared

54 Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace 2020.

55 Fanon 2008, p.176

condition of suffocation and its refusal. If a common breath and spirit emerges, it is out of the struggle.

The summer uprising was black-led, but solidly diverse. Demanding not just justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others through the conviction of their murderers, it demanded the abolition of the police. This reveals an interest of breathing in the truest sense of the word, an interest in the abolition of the whole climate of oppression and anxiety in which Black people specifically, and surplus populations in general, live.⁵⁶ For Fanon suffocation was a global condition under colonialism that may lead to revolts anywhere. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke, similarly, of the “interrelatedness of all communities and states.”

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.⁵⁷

This garment is one of struggle, but also of care. The fear of breathing together is strong, not only during a pandemic. The June uprising proceeded with rage and care. Videos of de-arrests circulated widely, and masks were worn for double protection: against the virus and against identification. No spike in COVID-cases resulted from this intense, seditious breathing together, and fewer arrests than one would imagine from a storm that blew through more than 2000 towns and cities.

Care has lessened the fear of breathing together in many places, and especially among those who do not possess enough to feign independence. In Barcelona, where I was locked down in Spring 2020, chat groups organized mutual aid on a street by street level, while black and queer acquaintances in New Orleans organized the distribution of food and medicine.⁵⁸ Such initiatives demonstrated, once again, that in networks of survival and solidarity, bare life is not bare, surplus populations not surplus, the anxious not alone.

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10. Towards a theory and practice of the interest of breathing

The world inaugurated in the age of separation has reached an epochal crisis. The capitalist re-combination of land, machinery, and labour has pushed atmospheric CO2 concentrations higher than at any previous point in human history and prehistory. Catastrophic climate change is

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⁵⁶ Gilmore 2007.

⁵⁷ King 1963.

⁵⁸ Gurba, 2020. Beltrame, 2020. For the importance of mutual aid and popular knowledge production in dealing with the ebola epidemic, see Richards, 2016.

already unfolding and accelerating. Having never fully recovered from the 2008 financial crash, COVID-19 has one again thrown the world economy into deep recession. Before those events: declining growth rates, broken social compacts, structural adjustment programs. After: more austerity and a financial economy propped up by low- or zero-interest rates, in a form of permanent life-support Keynesianism.⁵⁹

Worries and anxiety are ubiquitous, not only with regards to the pandemic, but in the intersecting crises of growth, social reproduction, liberal democracy, American hegemony, fossil capitalism. The expectational horizon of Progress, which allowed many to accept toil and deprivation in the present on the promise of future improvements, lies in tatters. Depending on class, some fear *déclassement* and the “migrant, criminal poor”, some fear unemployment and unpayable debts, and the unemployed fear means tests and austerity. Some, who survive by informal and illicit means, fear the police; and those who survive on the benevolence of relatives slowly suffocate in familial dependency.

The many crises of our time complicate calculations of self-interest and weaken the independence of the possessive individual. Some desperately cling on to their stakeholdership, fighting to repay loans, against migration’s imagined devaluation of citizenship, and work themselves into deep stress clinging to their work. Others struggle with new or old forms of dependency, on what remains of the welfare state, on charity or the family.

Under these conditions the interest of breathing re-emerges in forms both individual and collective. Even among those who claim their own right to breathe as purely personal freedom, we find traces of more-than-individual breath: the dangerous breathing together of anti-mask protests, the imagined conspiracies of others. Others find ways to affirm breathing together, with care, with anger and joy, like the Black Lives Matter protesters, who drew a placard with the following words by Audre Lorde: “Now is the time to conspire together - that is, to breathe together - filling our lungs to prepare for the work of singing anew”. Such joyful conspiracies require and proceed from the assemblage of a collective capacity to act, and requires forms of assembly and organisation, tactics and strategies, that make sense to their participants’ experiences and expectations, or provides them with the means to engage in an eventual leap into a collective practice of freedom.

When freed from the strictures of possessive individualism, the interest of breathing invites us to rethink interest formation more broadly. The interest in breathing is not an interest of the individual to consume and possess objects. The interest of breathing is not object-orientated, but ecological: it concerns the total arrangement of interdependencies, including those that are unequal, exploitative, or broken. Just as breath

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⁵⁹ Hansen 2021.

is not just a function of an individual body and a photosynthesizing plant, but of the atmosphere which both share with billions of other organisms, the interest of breathing is more than subjective and inter-subjective, but atmospheric, or interstitial. As any interest, this interest emerges from the experience-based and expectational navigation of the in-between (inter-esse), between the passions and the world. Thus, we may say interest is not a property of the subject, but an aspect of its individuation (in-spiration) and transindividuation (con-spiration). Interest is not formed once and for all, but in a constant back-and-forth (re-spiration), within an atmosphere, both spiritual (affective, ideological,) and material (contagious or clear, oppressive or free, toxic or not).

In being guided by experience and expectation, interest formation is guided by the beliefs, knowledges, rationalities, through which the subject makes sense of the past and future, a form of “theoretical reason” that orientates “practical reason”, to speak with Kant.⁶⁰ Ecological thought is the name of the mode of orientation needed not only to practically navigate the unfolding present, but to avoid debilitating anxiety. Under conditions of atmospheric suffocation, the world reveals itself as a vast collection of interdependencies. This planetary system cannot be understood as environment, but only as ecology. Whereas the notion of environment grasps nature as other to man, ecology grasps this totality immanently, as process and infinite relation. In the ecological sciences, nature is totalized through the tracing of networks of interdependency, the circulations of energy and matter between the multitude of species which form the atmosphere and nutrient cycles in constant interaction with geology and solar radiation. Breath, in other words, is ecological and ultimately global. This universality is not abstract, but concrete. Animism and pantheism present us with these insights not only intuitively and speculatively, but as experience and expectation, shaping the way we see the world. But if such sciences and spiritualities help us symbolize and imagine the totality -- God or nature -- they're not enough to situate us and to articulate the interest of breathing through *specific, partisan demands* and in relation to the openings and cracks of the conjuncture.

In this epochal crisis of the age of separation, interstitial practices gain renewed importance. For Marx, such practices played a key role in the transition to the capitalist mode of production:

Usury lives in the pores of production, as it were, just as the gods of Epicurus lived in the space between worlds. Money is so much harder to obtain, the less the commodity-form constitutes the general form of products. Hence the usurer knows no other barrier but the capacity of those who need money to pay or to resist.⁶¹

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60 Kant 1991.

61 Marx, 1981, chapter 36.

Before the victory of the capitalist mode of production was assured, the Diggers developed their own interstitial practices, working in the interstices of the dispossessed and the land that wasn't cultivated by the lords, connecting the former to one another and the land. In a note written during the final years of decolonization, Althusser similarly imagined communists as working like Epicurean gods, in the interstices of the imperialist world system.⁶² Both for Marx and Althusser, such descriptions had a purpose besides the analytical, to help us imagine the overcoming of capitalism, and thus to premonition or sustain collective interests expectationally.

Between equal rights, force decides. The question of the “universal right to breathe” is meaningless, without the composition of a universalising struggle against suffocation: partisan and ecological. The ecological partisans work in the interstices, connect people with one another and natural ecologies, so that ecological interests may emerge or be strengthened. While repairing or creating connections of interdependency among the dispossessed, weaving natural and social ecologies, they seek for the weak links in the anti-ecological capitalist system.⁶³ The minimal starting point for such a politics is catching a breath with others. “Even “the ‘spiritual not religious,’ ... the agnostics, even the most militant of atheists” writes Catherine Keller, “are usually glad to catch a breath in shared silence—and so to stretch the moment”.⁶⁴ Stretching the moment together, we experience that in breathing there is no competition, only radical hostility to the forces of suffocation.

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62 Althusser 1986, unpublished manuscript. Thanks to Panagiotis Sotiris for providing me with a copy.

63 One of the best authors on this point is Andreas Malm, who runs far ahead of interest formation, drawing tactical and strategic lines for a collective subject that does not (yet?) exist, a pessimist with great expectations. Malm 2020.

64 Keller 2018, p. 361.

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Art and True state of Emergency

Wang Hui

Abstract: "2020+" is a large-scale art exhibition presented at the Beijing Red Brick Art Museum on July 31st, 2020 through different media, online as well as and offline, exhibiting the work of 15 artists, such as Chen Shaoxiong, Chen Zhen, Olafur Eliasson, Hao Hao, Huang Yongping, Liang Shaoji, Lin Tianmiao, Ann Rorschach, Rachel Ross, Amway Sarah, Song Dong, Tao Hui, Wang Gongxin, Yang Zhenzhong, Yin Xiuzhen, etc., covering different categories, such as images, installations, interactive installations, etc., with the purpose to open a multi-dimensional cognitive space during the period of the global havoc of the new corona virus, look back at the earth from the universe, leap from the perspective of death to the angle of view of the macro formation, and draw out the reflection on the reality, parting, consumption, life, etc., closely related to the issues of news of the current moment. In addition to the offline exhibition hall of the Red Brick Art Museum, the "2020+" exhibition also exhibited the online work "Earth Perspective" created by Olafur Eliasson for the 2020 "World Earth Day", the online presentation, created by Tencent Art in the exclusively for the Chinese region. Professor Wang Hui was invited to be the art consultant for this exhibition and wrote the preface for the exhibition. In this preface, the author proposes that the worldwide pandemic of the virus will lead the human society which has not yet broken away from the measures of the social isolation into an even more dangerous and uncertain era, characterized by the disappearance of the clear border between the state of normality and state of exception. In this sense, the function of art is the opposite of its mission, which is to create a "true state of emergency", as Walter Benjamin said: to promote the formation of new cognition and sensitivity, and the birth of new forms of expression, which in turn provide inspiration and opportunities for the changes in the times we are in.

Keywords: 2020+, emergency, normality, chain of crises

At the end of the novel *Plague*, Camus described two kind of feelings of separating oneself from the world of plague: one kind is in the time, when plague has not ended yet, three people as medical doctors slip away in the night to go to the seaside for a swim, in one moment they experienced a long-time absent feeling of being carefree, however they nevertheless returned to the enclosed city; the second one is, when the plague suddenly ends, and the people, who were longing to return to the state of normality nevertheless bring about a inappropriate feeling. The opening of the "2020+" stands in between these two emotional states: COVID-19 is spread all over the world, however after the harsh battle against the epidemic, the majority of the Chinese regions obtained indeterminate freedom; people were strenuously seeking the fit between the "state of emergency" and "state of normality." Within limits of the world, the

virus has overstepped the boundaries of immunology, and triggered the chain of crises: economic crisis, political crisis, military crisis, sanitary crisis are all in reciprocal relation with the pestilence, so that the human societies, which have not yet broken away from social distancing enter into even more dangerous and unpredictable times – its characteristics is the fast disappearing of the clear distinction between the state of normality and state of exception.

The virus does not only invade individual person's body, but it also favors the collective body, and favors those people, who roam in markets, prisons, religious places or places of entertainment and simultaneously immediately infect the members of their families or their most close friends; the management of immunology requests the people to maintain the social distance, and to alienate as far as possible from the collective activities, but also requires to form strict collective boundaries between different areas. The new world stricken by the epidemic situation redefined the meaning of the community, cities, the borders and customs, and simultaneously re-divided the land, sea and sky traffic in turn. Protection and exclusion, unity and alienation, and prevention and mutual requirement are reestablished in new forms; however the language, which expresses these new contradictions (nation, state, sovereignty, ethnicity, regions) is nevertheless mostly old. In the times, when the old language is already deficient, can art provide a language that accurately expresses the new situation?

The individuality of life and death has sharply declined during the pandemic. People watch the rising and falling of numbers every day, and view the isolation and exile as the self-protection policy of the community or the country. Vanishing of the people like a receding wave has become a mass incident. How should we give prominence again to the individual lives and the meaning toward oneself in this mass event? The investigation of individuals from different contexts, different cultures, and in different socio-political conditions emitting "I will die," highlighting the various states of life in the shadow of the end of death, might be precisely the starting point for further inquiry.

While witnessing the singular persons one by one answering the inquiry, I could not but think about the countless medical personnel, countless volunteers, and countless anonymous people of the same kind, who had no choice but to stay trapped in the same place, and nevertheless constantly pay close attention to the calamity, knowing they can individually die, but still risk their own lives, devoted to the cause of saving others, that feeling of "endless distant places, endless people, all related to me." Can contemporary art transcend the style of individualism and recreate the detailed investigation of the human faith amidst the energy and hidden storage of the collectivity in the background of these actions?

The spread of virus has greatly increased the dependence on science and technology – especially medicine and digital technology,

but it has at the same time caused the issue of the boundary line between science and politics. The scientific process and its verification of results have to suspend the influence of politics, the economic funding, the international collaboration and "exterior elements" of the establishment of its process. Scientists, just as before, appeal to the autonomy of science in defense of their own activity; however, in times of the pandemic, the international relations, backgrounds of governments, national decision-making, social evaluation, public opinion, and various rumors have broken through the conventional boundaries of science and technology. Facing governmental inspection doesn't include only the funding of the resources for the research institutions, partnerships and social statuses of the experts on public health, but also the WHO itself.

Under these conditions, scientists and their research are also under the microscope of governments. Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has summarized this phenomenon as the "politicization of medicine" and "medicalization of politics," but these two concepts have room to go one step further: Bruno Latour in his early research came to an enlightening conclusion, that science's rejection of sociality is actually precisely the manifestation of its sociality. In this sense it is necessary to ask: what word would more accurately describe the mutual relationship between medicine and politics or sociality?

The global ecological crisis has prompted people to re-examine development models and lifestyles, but the epidemic crisis has also enhanced the reliance of the people on technology and urged the fear of lockdowns and breaking apart of the supply chains.

Digital technology has not only changed the mode of communication, but has also transformed social relations – from the mode of daily communication between relatives and friends, the mode of carrying out of education and public activities (such as distance learning, conferences and exhibitions, etc.) to the mode of management of countries, all have undergone tremendous changes. The pandemic also broke the illusion of the interconnection is the peaceful and natural channel. The flourishing of consulting the news, the revelry of social media is inevitably and self-evidently equated with the expanding of the public. However, the contrary is true, its consequence is the fragmentation of the public. In the introductory reading of the "The World Post" it is pointed out that in the contemporary context the interconnectedness may become the driving force of the separation. The question is, in the so-called post-truth era, can art play the role of anti-media media? What kind of cultural and political conditions can enable technological interconnection to become a channel for dialogue, communication and integration, rather than becoming an incentive for separation and confrontation?

The state of emergency has become the norm in daily life, and its scale and length are unprecedented. Theorists worry that socio-political

procedures will be replaced by sudden mechanisms, and people will have to succumb to more interventions in daily life, and the large-scale development of technological means are super convenient for such interventions. But is the dependence on technology just a product of a state of emergency? We have to ask ourselves: are the crises in the political system, economic system, and social relations caused by a state of emergency? Or on the contrary, the state of emergency is just the product of political, economic, social and ecological crises? The state of emergency reminds people: society needs self-protection, life needs self-management, production and lifestyle need to be readjusted, and unequal global relations need to be changed. The normalization of the state of emergency induces people to engage in their own work as usual. Driven by the desire to return to normal, they consciously and voluntarily conceal the conditions that cause the state of emergency, so that the world of life “unaffectedly” continues. In this sense, the true function of art is the opposite of its mission as creation of the “true state of emergency,” according to Walter Benjamin: it is the promotion and the formation of new cognition and sensitivity, and the birth of new forms of expression, which in turn provide inspiration and opportunities for the changes in the times we are in.

Therefore, “2020+” is not just the theme of an exhibition, but it is the meaning of an uncertain future, a “real emergency,” and the failure of the old language (including contemporary art) and the emergence of the multiple possibilities.

July 28th, 2020 on the trip to Yuenan
(translated from Chinese by Katja Kolšek)

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The Middle-Class Leviathan: Corona, the “Fascism” Blackmail, and the Defeat of the Working Class

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and Joshua
Pickett-Depaolis

Abstract: After months of an unprecedented global economic shutdown in the spring of 2020, whose political orchestration by elite liberals and conservatives kept the world in suspense, it all suddenly seems like a memory from the past: within days, the same liberal elites, now hitching themselves to the riots against racist police violence in the US, put social distancing measures on the line. The volatility of the liberal imaginary, which can be seen in the view of the police as the beneficial state enforcer of the “Stay at Home, Save Lives” -policy in one minute, and a “structurally racist” institution in the next, is not incidental, however. In fact, as this article will argue, at no point in history has society been so unequivocally submitted to the Leviathanic “mood swings” of the professional-managerial class, historically known as despotism, which express the helpless discontent of this strata, while reinforcing the dictatorship of capital and the political absence of the working class.

The authoritarian excesses of left-liberal elite thinking however, find their logic in the need to construct a spectacle of mass consensus around continued neoliberal restructuring through the deployment of an alleged ‘fascist’ threat. Today, a left which represents the interests of the professional middle classes demands unity around its agenda of therapeutic authoritarianism in the name of struggle against the ‘extreme right’. We counter both the Middle Class Leviathan and the populist right by making the case for an exit from the culturalist class war from above, and a return to the defence of working class interests.

Keywords: Marxism, Populism, Public Health, Coronavirus, Neoliberalism, Labour Movement, Fascism, lockdown,

Lockdown Enthusiasm and the European Left

The spring of 2020 was a great time for the authoritarian personality. Political commentators from *The Guardian* to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, television hosts of the BBC, the ARD and ZDF, TF 1 and France 2, reported and listened attentively as experts and pundits from respectable institutions became the new frontier of political decision-making – while the likes of Macron, Merkel and Johnson barely registered in the splendour of the new philosopher kings.¹ In a moment of the biggest global health crisis since the Spanish flu of World War I, the outbreak of a deadly virus of animal origin in China that spread all over the world within three months, these virologists and epidemiologists – Prof. Christian Drosten of Charité Berlin, the now infamous Prof. Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London, and Jérôme

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¹ Except for Boris Johnson who during his recovery from a Covid-19 infection received roughly as many speedy recovery as passionate death wishes on social media.

Salomon, managing director for Santé—seemed naturally appointed with the mission to simply tell everyone what to do, with politicians, administrators, even EU officials acting at their mercy. In the short moment between frenzy and panic, when it seemed that even Frau Merkel was out of her depth, a sudden inner state of emergency caught on in the public sphere. While this new level of enthusiastic submission to experts was surely pandered to by an unhinged and clueless political apparatus, it also surpassed it: a German journalist, looking pastoral and grave, yet calm and collected, spoke in the name of the many, not the few, when he announced on March 19th on the German national broadcaster ARD that “while curfews have always been associated with dictatorships we correctly pride ourselves to have fought against, we should also recognise when the time has come to make an exception.”²

This newly discovered love for curfews, the ‘rule of state’, and social distancing rules has however been quite popular with the left and the left-liberal side of the political spectrum. Even for observers who have long noticed the topsy-turvy appropriation of culturalist, originally right-wing views on the self-proclaimed left, this seemed slightly unsettling. Police actions in parks against individuals reading books on benches, police using drones to shame individuals walking their dogs in the Derbyshire Peak District with not a soul in sight, police control of ‘social distancing’ measures – notice how the WHO’s brief attempt to replace the term with ‘physical distancing’ was a stillborn idea – were deemed necessary, especially by the members of society who could afford a house with a garden. Needless to say, the obedience to social rules in a situation that seemed exceptional and unprecedented for many, was also reflected in applauding the NHS and other national health care providers – unless they were on strike for better working conditions and higher pay which was met with ‘disappointment’ that they refused to care for patients.³ Likewise, for the educated, left leaning middle class, reflecting on the plight of women and ‘people of colour’ was an *affaire d’honneur*, except for those living in refugee camps. Accordingly, COVID-19, viewed under the aspect of neoliberal competition between genders and races, was soon instrumentalised as a victorious field for women in the gender war, and female political leaders were painted as ‘the secret weapon in the fight against Coronavirus’⁴. And anyone who thought that the pandemic would induce the end of the neoliberal order as we know it, and thus the somewhat (one may be inclined to think) less urgent obsession with identity, could be quickly corrected by pointing

2 “Tagesschau”, March 19th, 2020.

3 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/coronavirus-marks-the-best-and-worst-time-for-workers-to-strike>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/secret-weapon-fight-against-coronavirus-women>

out that “Your ‘strange’ crush on Rishi Sunak could actually be a racist fetish”, as the *Independent* noted on April 9th, and the lament that ‘The key decisions about lockdown and containment are all being made by men.’⁵ The lockdown itself, incidentally, has never been subject to debate, to the contrary: “Stay Home, Save Lives” became the new social order whose transgression, except for the unlucky majority of the workforce deemed essential, the state force was allowed to fine and sanction, backed by left-leaning middle class consent.

Lockdown enthusiasts on the political left, such as uncalled-for opinion-promoter Owen Jones, became experts on social rules and top-down advice to ‘prevent the death of 250 K people’, as Neil Ferguson put it, before he himself became a victim of the lockdown rules he designed and helped to set up. However, especially for poorer people with school age children who, in order to benefit from social benefits, are required to perform ‘mini-jobs’ deemed ‘essential’, or workers whose access to the job market is defined by their ‘system-relevant’ character (retail, logistics, production), homeschooling and parenting are excruciating tasks and, more often than not, simply impossible. Yet, the most outspoken propagation for the extension of school closures and zero tolerance for calls to reopen schools came precisely from left-wing outlets such as Novara Media whose Ash Sarkar, in various Tweets, aggressively advocated homeschooling, completely ignoring the question of class in that private schools will ensure the education of their pupils, while working class families struggle on⁶ – not a great look for a ‘literal communist’. And Keir Milburn, keen on a counter-factual moral elevation of the lockdown as the ‘realm of freedom’, suggested, in a grotesque non sequitur, that ‘the left’s embrace of lockdown comes from a more democratic mode of thinking which starts by recognising how our actions impact on others and how other people, in turn, affect us, but then moves to recognise more impersonal structures, such as racism, sexism, and capitalism, that constrain our lives and make one course of action more likely than another’⁷. Our actions impact others, and other people’s actions impact us: forget Marx, Weber or Durkheim, here comes the real exegesis of the individual in late capitalism.

In fact, however, educated and left-leaning people’s enthusiastic embrace of authoritarianism during the Corona pandemic bizarrely reveals their deep agreement with the world as it is. The left’s newly discovered love for state authority and organs enforcing these measures, a love in the name of the ‘vulnerable’, precisely reflects

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/memo-to-the-uk-womens-voices-can-also-be-useful-in-this-crisis>

6 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/15/2m-children-in-uk-have-done-almost-no-school-work-in-lockdown>

7 <https://novaramedia.com/2020/06/01/the-pandemic-is-changing-how-it-feels-to-be-free/>

a *radical indifference* towards the precariat and ‘underclass’. The unfortunate debate over “life” vs. “the economy” reveals this. In a recent article, written by no one less than revered Marxist icon Paul Mattick Jr. and aptly titled “Their Money or Your Life”⁸, this strange acceptance of the false dichotomy of life and money, under capitalist relations of production no less, comes to the fore. One would think that a verified Marxist knew better than to think that ‘life’ bare and simple stood in opposition to moneyed interests, whether from capitalists or workers themselves whose sale of labour power presents the sole means of survival. Instead, Mattick somewhat idealistically advocates the great opportunity the lockdown presents for ‘rethinking our lives’ and organising ‘our’ resources: “There has been an explosion of mutual aid in myriad forms, from amateur mask-making to bringing food to health workers to something as complex as improvising a computerized health-care system (in Cape Town, South Africa). In Spain 200 taxi drivers, many of them from Pakistan, organized themselves to provide free transportation for doctors and other medical workers.”⁹ This romance with communizing forms for organising poverty apparently sees no cognitive dissonance of a specifically cynical type with people dependent on food banks for survival who are “finding them overwhelmed from one day to the next” and the strange optimism evaporating from the contention that “[everyone] is forced to rethink what life is about, not to mention how to keep it going.” In fact, we learn, the “shutdown of business as usual has had other (sic) positive effects: blue skies over Beijing; dolphins in the canals of Venice; a relatively traffic- and smog-free Los Angeles”, a remark that can be repudiated for its guilelessness alone, were it not for its naive reproduction of fake news.¹⁰ This bizarre fetishisation of a disruption to regular economic activity however seems to think the spread of the virus is giving workers ‘something bigger to fear than their boss’¹¹, when revolting Latin Americans in late May identified this fear not as the virus, but as starvation.¹²

Workers in Chile, Columbia, Mexico, Libya, and India, for instance, could only hope for a level of ‘normality’ that the enforcement of global economic shutdown so enthusiastically embraced by PMCs and leftist

8 <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/field-notes/Their-Money-or-Your-Life?>

9 <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/05/field-notes/Their-Money-or-Your-Life>

10 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts/>

11 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/coronavirus-marks-the-best-and-worst-time-for-workers-to-strike>, quoted in Mattick above.

12 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52717402>.

intellectuals in the West made impossible. With whole industries disrupting production and a literal expulsion of workers onto the streets of Mumbai, Delhi, Santiago, Tripoli, and Mexico City, from street vendors to factory workers, from sex workers to the retail and hospitality sectors, the abstract sanctification of ‘life’ vs. cold economic interests begins to look pale. For Marx, needless to say, ‘to be a productive worker is ... not a piece of luck, but a misfortune’¹³ - but a misfortune, no less, that secures daily survival. In fact, this disinterestedness in the concrete lives of – dare we say it – black and brown people in the Global South parodies the interest in the ‘dignity’ of an abstract ‘human being’ that feigns consideration of the plight of non-Westerners, as it parodies the alleged concern over racism and sexism. According to Adorno and Marcuse, it is precisely bourgeois, and, indeed, middle class bourgeois consciousness that generates an abstract apotheosis of the human being, while being succinctly disinterested in his or her daily survival. The talk and apotheosis of “man” (Mensch), or “life” bare and simple, in fact, “simply defect us from seeing how little it is here a question of man, who has been condemned to the status of an appendage.”¹⁴ And since Marcuse we know that “[culture] ... exalts the individual without freeing him from his factual debasement. Culture speaks of the dignity of ‘man’ without concerning itself with a concretely more dignified status for men.”¹⁵ The outrage at individuals transgressing social distancing measures - “you want people to die!” – ironically expresses this disinterestedness in the actual lives of people, paralleled by the indifference towards actual social change for the stratum of society that suffers most under the class politics of lockdown. As though they lived in an alternate reality, for the liberal, and sometimes the radical left,¹⁶ the lockdown became the site of struggle of a science-guided paternal state against ‘selfish people’ enjoying themselves in outside spaces like parks and beaches. In the name of the ‘vulnerable’, it absorbed an authoritarian *Kulturkampf* on its own terms, that at best disregarded the ramification of total economic shutdown for the poorest, and at worst whipped up a classist resentment against ordinary, often working, individuals to whom the often-used label ‘vulnerable’ mysteriously never applies. In the spring of 2020, in short, the authoritarian personality found a safe harbour in the left middle class.

13 Marx, 1976, p. 644.

14 Adorno, 1973, p. 60-61.

15 Marcuse, 1968.

16 <https://www.marx21.de/hygienedemos-die-brandstifter-sitzen-in-den-chefetagen/>

Social Distancing No More: the rise of the Middle Class Leviathan

In late May, debates around the Coronavirus-induced economic shock suddenly seemed like a remnant of the past: in the wake of the atrocious murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer, one more in a series of gruesomely violent murders of unarmed black men and women by state officials in the US in recent years, people took to the streets. Within days, mass looting and riots in Minnesota spread across 50 major cities, and the Black Lives Matter-movement whose political force had temporarily waned, was spectacularly resuscitated in the several million strong global protests against police violence. 'Punching cops', sneered at as a white working class hobby in protest of lockdown measures, suddenly became a noble thing to do. Nurses who only weeks ago urged everyone to 'flatten the curve' and held up signs that read 'Stay home for us' have switched to signs reading 'White coats for black lives' and joined the ranks of worldwide protest against racist police violence. As *Politico* magazine has noted, 'some of the most prominent public health experts in America, like former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Tom Frieden, who loudly warned against efforts to rush reopening ... is now supportive of mass protests. Their claim: If we don't address racial inequality, it'll be that much harder to fight Covid-19.'¹⁷ This new signalling of solidarity with the protestors stood in clear contrast to the condemnation by the same professionals of the (mainly white) so-called 'public health gatherings' from a few weeks earlier. As could be expected, the disparaging of these earlier protests had a political motive, as an open letter, signed by nearly 1300 public health professionals, infectious diseases professionals, and community stakeholders, revealed: 'As of May 30, we are witnessing continuing demonstrations in response to ongoing, pervasive, and lethal institutional racism set off by the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among many other Black lives taken by police. A public health response to these demonstrations is also warranted, but this message must be wholly different from the response to white protesters resisting stay-home orders. Infectious disease and public health narratives adjacent to demonstrations against racism must be consciously anti-racist, and infectious disease experts must be clear and consistent in prioritizing an anti-racist message.'¹⁸

What happened? How could this open cognitive dissociation – 'we oppose protests and support lockdown, except for the lockdown violating protests we support' – be rationalised? Does anti-racism beat an infectious disease on the social urgency-scale? Because there is

17 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/04/public-health-protests-301534>

18 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jyfn4Wd2i6bRi12ePghMHtX3ys1b7K1A/view>

no objective in the nature of the offense, nor in the reactions to it, that justifies the spread of Covid-19 – especially because '[black] people are ... more likely to develop COVID-19', as the letter contends – , the signatories are unequivocal in their *political* motivation to support one kind of protest while condemning the other, compromising their own concern for public health. To be sure, at the very beginning, the quasi-insurrectionary explosion against police violence and racism in the US were not orchestrated by the educated middle class, but came from the underclass, the so-called 'surplus proletariat' of a mostly precariously employed black urban population whose per capita wealth ranks alongside that of an adult in Palestine.¹⁹ But just as quickly, two notable appropriations of the riots took place, one by geography, and one by social stratum. The first took off immediately after Floyd's murder became news in Europe, with London, Manchester, Berlin, Paris - "Black Lives Matter *ici aussi!*" - Copenhagen, Stockholm, but also major cities outside Europe, as in Australia, mobilising the biggest mass protest since the anti-Austerity revolts of ten years ago and, in France, defying the police ban over health concerns. As Alex Hochuli has recently written²⁰, this export of social problems emblematic of the US to 'rich-world countries' in Europe and Australasia 'involves a short-circuit between American and non-American identities', paradoxically identifying their mostly middle class social being with that of 'underdog' Americans. This is hardly surprising in the face of a political elite in Europe, and especially in the UK, that 'has been at great pains to recast itself as post-racial and multicultural for decades'²¹, often in open abhorrence of the working class. The recent mobilisation, therefore, of mostly young, liberal, 'instinctively cosmopolitan', well-educated people from the middle strata of society denotes the final victory of the globalisation of wokeness that has filled the void of protests against austerity, refugee governance, and the EU's handling of the crisis from the last decade. Most of all, however, it demonstrates the victory of a new political agitator-subject: the left liberal PMC. Its power to impose lockdown 'to save 250 K lives', and just as quickly to lift it when it can appropriate a movement to shape it in its own image, no longer follows any rational agency nor political guidelines, but its own interest as the ideologically most powerful class, which widely determines political and medial debates, decisions, legal implementations, and reception of events, historical or actual. As political scientist Philip Cunliffe has noted, 'The global BLM protests – i.e. those outside the US – are

19 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/what-if-black-america-were-a-country/380953/>

20 <https://damagemag.com/2020/06/17/the-triumph-of-american-idealism/>

21 Ibid.

a tremendous demonstration of global middle class power. They're clearly announcing to the world, 'We get to decide when lockdown ends, and governments will let us do what we want, because as you can see.'"²² The Middle Class Leviathan, born out of the failure of the political class to deal with political disillusionment, now 'gets to decide', filling the void of the orchestrator of political decision-making, dictating its own neoliberal policy in the 'interest of all.' Here is where Jeff Bezos, Unilever's Ben and Jerry, Airbnb, Apple, and Google step in to present their own policy in the light of concerns about racism, while systematically undermining demands for higher pay, punishing strikes, attacking workers rights.

The culture war, clear as daylight to anyone with eyes to see, was a class war to begin with – but a class war from above.

The Party System as the Echo Chamber of the Leviathan

If the classical social democratic and post-Stalinist parties represented the corporatist integration of the workers as a class within bourgeois society, today's centre left, like its populist nemesis, is a playground for the fractured middle strata.²³ Decades of restructuring have successfully returned the working class to its "natural state" as an atomized mass of precarious and disposable bearers of labour power increasingly unfamiliar with even the most basic forms of self-organisation.²⁴

This void not only forms an omnipresent barrier to any renewed emancipatory mass politics, but by the same token takes any possibility of truly radical reaction off the table. Fascism and National Socialism emerged historically as a response to the direct and indirect effects of the October Revolution, as a counter-movement to a global working class offensive for state power. Today's working class is hardly able to aspire to the "partial autonomy" of corporatism, let alone the "complete autonomy" of class dictatorship.²⁵

In this environment, fascism as a movement of "revolutionary conservation"²⁶ is left without a credible enemy to mobilize against and

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22 Philip Cunliffe on Twitter, June 6th, 2020.

23 23 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/09/16/the-brahmin-left-vs-the-merchant-right-a-comment-on-thomas-pikettys-new-book/>

24 24 <https://lbo-news.com/2018/09/10/sadly-there-is-no-strike-wave/>, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/30/strikes-in-uk-fall-to-lowest-level-since-records-began-in-1893>.

25 Gramsci Antonio, 1996, Volume 2, p 92.

26 As Nikolai Bukharin observed at the XII Congress of the Bolshevik Party: "More than the representatives of any other party, the Fascists have embodied and put into practice the experience of the Russian Revolution. If we consider them from a formal perspective, that is, from the perspective of the strategy of their political methods, we see a perfect application of Bolshevik tactics, and specifically, of Russian Bolshevism, in the form of a rapid concentration of forces and a vigorous action carried out by a steady and compact military organisation." Cited in Losurdo Dominico, 2004, p 44.

therefore stillborn as a state project. Even in those underdeveloped countries such as Turkey and India where movements closest in form and content to classical fascism have seized power, their disinclination to abolish the parliamentary regime is indicative of the lack of any enemy worthy of the name. In the developed world, fascism as a paramilitary movement for the abolition of bourgeois democracy is noteworthy for its total absence from the political mainstream. In the West today, the dream of right wing revolution is restricted to a marginal underground which like its Islamist co-thinkers is more fodder for security service manipulations than a threat to "constitutional order".

This absence of fascism poses a problem for left liberalism which closely parallels that of the deficit in worker radicalism for the right. After all, in the absence of a reactionary offensive, the left liberal program of multiculturalism, feminism, anti-ableism, trans activism, etc. increasingly comes to appear as exactly what it is: passive submission to the dictatorship of capital in its now stale post 68' rebrand as pluralistic liberation.

Thankfully, this particular form of historical development provides an elegant if not completely satisfactory solution. The triumph of post-modern liberalism among the cultural elites creates a counter-movement in the form of a diffuse resentment, especially among the impoverished middle classes and parts of the working class, which stretches from building contractors and car dealership owners to pensioners and manual workers. Feeling bereft of not only the economic stability they enjoyed prior to restructuring but even the empty symbolic recognition which liberalism grants its favourite minorities in lieu of any respite from the continual material brutalization it cheerfully inflicts, these malcontents assert their discontent in the form of "populism".

What emerges, in consequence, is a cross class coalition of atomized resentment, anchored in middle class fractions without the cultural capital of the PMC and workers unmoored from traditional worker politics. If populism in power is little more than business as usual, performed with a melodramatic flair and a taste for the absurd, paradigmatic in Trump, that in no way deters left liberalism from making the best of the situation and christening it "fascism" or at least a terrifying slide towards the same.

The core of the contradiction between liberalism and populism is not political at all, but aesthetic. Little more can be expected in the post-historical void created by the defeat of the working class. The liberal prefers the marching orders of big capital to be dictated to her by a calm and neutral technocrat with the gravitas of a statesman. The populist on the contrary wants an entertainment product worthy of stand up-comedy or reality TV to distract him from his gray abjection. What is crucial is not the substantially identical political content, but its discursive packaging. Will the totalised real domination of capital

market itself as “government by nerds” or an “anti-establishment” circus act? In either case living labour is so much flesh for the slaughter.

If Eastern Bloc protestors helped inaugurate the “end of history” by taking their yearning for novel consumer brands to the streets, Trump voters gave it a new lease on life by showing their preference for a novel political brand in the polling booth. However, this aesthetic opposition is all the liberal left needs to rally its support base in an unending and exceedingly low intensity struggle against its own mirror image.

In the liberal left imaginary, Trump's violations of the right to asylum or possible post-Brexit restrictions of immigration become Nazi-like atrocities to be fought whatever the cost. EU concentration camps in Libya? Not so much. Trump's Twitter tirades against protesters are seen as Klan-like outbursts, Obama's dismissal of protesters as “thugs” is forgotten.

Just as populism substitutes for an absent fascism in the paranoid imaginary of the liberal left, it in turn plays the same role for its right wing partner in crime. Within this logic, woke capitalism is denounced as “cultural Marxism” and investment in green energy is abhorred as the first step in a transition to communism. The only thing lacking in this theatre production is authentic antagonism. Not only is the capital relation itself beyond question, the modifications of its accumulation regime open to consideration remain narrowly constricted.

Even on the seemingly contested terrain of immigration, the differences are more apparent than real. If Trump's wall is merely a finishing touch on what was already one of the most militarized borders in the world, the demand to “abolish ICE” is an act of rhetorical extremism which in practice constitutes a call to - restore the INS.²⁷ Likewise, Corbyn calls for 10000 more policemen on the streets while Johnson in power nationalizes the railways.

If the Chinese ruling class is compelled by its mode of exercising hegemony to conceal its factional differences behind an image of monolithic unity, Western democracy conceals its monolithic unity behind an increasingly dramatic image of existential combat.

Like a television show with falling ratings, the managers of democracy resort to outrageous plot twists to hold on to a diminishing body of viewers. However, despite their best efforts the viewers increasingly recognise that the wild hijinks on the screen correspond to nothing in their own increasingly precarious lives and change the channel. The working class non-voter is essentially a realist.

As Lenin observed of the conflict between Republicans and Democrats in the early years of the 20th century: “Their fight has not had any serious importance for the mass of the people. The people

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27 The INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) was the agency responsible for immigration enforcement prior to the transfer of this function to the newly formed ICE in 2003.

have been deceived and diverted from their vital interests by means of spectacular and meaningless duels between the two bourgeois parties.”²⁸

Social Movements as Mobilization Campaigns and the Leviathan as “Transmission Belt”

The middle class cannot have a politics of its own. In the absence of a worker drive to abolish the value relation it is condemned reluctantly or not, to play the same role in political life that it does in the production process: that of a functionary of capital.

From BLM to the Climate Strike, from the Women's March to #unteilbar, the social movements of today are constituted by a strata of middle class functionaries who mobilize an inter-class mass around an agenda suitable to big capital which foots the bill for the operations of its cadre via the non-profit sector. Speaking of the opposition between state and civil society in today's liberal pluralist regime is a mystification. The state *and* civil society are alternating modalities of mass mobilization and control in the interest of the famous “one percent”.

The conspiracy theories of the right who see the “progressive” movements of today as the packaged product of a financial elite are not so much wrong as *incomplete*. They inevitably neglect to add that it is other factions of the very same elite who bankroll their own “organic and spontaneous” movements for the “traditional family” or “secure borders”. In fact, the more the working class is atomized and deprived of any substantive representation, the more actual political life comes to resemble the most paranoid conspiracy theory.

The working class is reduced to disorganized gestures of protest. Whether raiding Paris or burning the Third Precinct, both are almost seamlessly absorbed within the narratives of the bourgeois parties and their middle-class functionaries. Just as Lenin saw the trade unions as a “transmission belt”²⁹ between the proletarian party and the disorganized masses, contemporary civil society functions as the transmission belt between the cadre of state monopoly capital and the workers reduced to citizen-consumers.

A perpetual activist mobilization which ensures the continued demobilization and isolation of the majority is the governing logic of contemporary “social movements”. The dynamic of party competition and of opposition allows for the minimum of vitality and flexibility required to sustain the system. The bourgeois monopoly of the political party system finds its necessary support in the repetitive mass campaigns of the apparatus of managed discontent.

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28 Lenin V.I, 1975 Volume 18, p 402-3.

29 Lenin V.I, 1975, Volume 42, p 382.

The middle class which staffs this Leviathan resents the real managers of the system to the same extent it depends on them to pay the bills. Therefore, all elements of this machine share a faux radicalism of the lowest common denominator, indicated by attacks on the “corrupt political establishment” or moralistic outrage against “racial capitalism”. Whatever its diverse forms of appearance, this radicalism encounters a common destiny in the helpless reproduction of the established order it claims to abhor.

Every popular democratic demand finds its organized expression monopolised by the middle class functionaries of big capital. In this context, democratic movements are turned towards the reactionary end of perpetuating the political nullification of the working class and the unchallenged leadership of the bourgeois over the public sphere.

The sectarian left, surviving from the October Revolution far from seeking to reconstruct independent worker politics as a precondition for leadership over civil society, embarrass themselves by playacting as the extreme left of petty bourgeois democracy. The struggle against oppression replaces the abolition of exploitation in their conceptual horizon. And particularly activism in popular movements eclipses the organization of workers power in their practical activity. On the other side of the coin, the spontaneist trend simply endorses the primitive forms of protest remaining in the aftermath of working class defeat. Both converge in subordinating themselves to the “reactionary democracy” through which the petty bourgeois and its capitalist paymasters monopolise discontent.

Finally, those who look towards a renewed social democracy hope to break the PMC monopoly on the brokerage of popular discontent in favour of a renewed labour aristocracy. Like in the “good old days” before neoliberalism, the bourgeois will once more be cajoled to pay a hefty sum to whole categories of privileged workers as the price of hegemony. The PMC Leviathan will be replaced by a labour bureaucratic Behemoth integrating the workers within bourgeois society not as atomized individuals, but an estate. Unfortunately for these dreamers, the compromise they seek to restore only emerged as a side effect of the revolutionary struggle.

The tendencies described above are not simply subjective errors, but a reflection of the comprehensive defeat of the working class in the realm of ideas. Facing this catastrophe the temptation to find an easy way out – whether in identifying petty bourgeois protest with revolution, or hoping for the state to turbocharge worker reformism from above – is immense.

Back to Basics

Breaking the monopoly of the Leviathan over public life is a precondition for any new sequence of emancipatory mass politics. The only force capable of producing a rupture from the “stasis within activity” of

petty bourgeois mobilization is a working class conscious of its historic interest in the negation of capital organized concretely as a party. As a protracted and dynamic relation between mass democracy and centralized leadership, which progressively displaces the petty bourgeois in leadership over civil society, it advances towards unmediated antagonism against the state.

Such a party will never be built starting from activism in cross-class social movements. Still less by the abstract proclamation of a “correct” program. It requires systematic activity in neighbourhoods and workplaces to build democratic and independent organizations of economic struggle. Without such a basis, Marxism is either liquidated into bourgeois politics or dissolves into a repetition of empty abstractions.

To build this basis, we must exit from electoral politics and hashtag movements in favour of a protracted experimentation with new forms of worker organisation adapted to the harsh terrain produced by capital's historic offensive. We need to prepare to make our modest contribution to the renewal of worker combativity from below and outside of schematic legal formalisms. This is not an easy task, but a daunting, perhaps even discouraging prospect. However, it remains the only way to give communist commitment a concrete content.

Refusing the distractions offered by the managers of permitted discontent and the get-rich-quick schemes of parliamentary speculators, we must take the long road of workers democracy. We cannot escape the end of history through a Lassalian appeal to the benevolence of established power or a dark Sorelian dream of collapse.

The movement of capital is the essence behind the fluctuations of political form and we must master this movement at its heart in the reversal of the domination imposed against living labour. Till then the post political spectacle will continue, while the social fabric degrades not so much into fascism as the algorithmic management of passive isolation. Or as the WHO puts it “every generation has a higher purpose. Ours is to stay home”.

This push towards a social void in which technocratic totalitarianism reduces the worker to a machine without class identity is the nihilism which underpins every “good intention” of middle class civil society. The struggle against this desert, to constitute class politics within the struggle for the wage, is the emancipatory alternative which remains embedded in the structure of modern society itself. This struggle is our heritage and our hope.

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The State in Times of Coronavirus: The pendulum of the "Illusory Community"

Álvaro García Linera

Abstract: In 2020 and for months, about 3.9 billion people around the world have stopped most of their economic, educational and recreational activities to slow the spread of a virus. Neither the call for a general strike nor the presence of gigantic repressive armies were needed to instantly freeze the processes of capitalist accumulation in half the world and leave the main cities deserted. Everyone answered the call of their states, an institution apparently in extinction, but which was the only one that came in the midst of a global panic, giving rise to what the IMF called the "great reclusion," which in reality is a euphemism for a suspended capitalism. This protagonism of the State, and also of society, above the markets and the value chains has revealed the limitations and failures of a good part of the current conceptualizations of this elusive and omnipresent social relationship called the State. Likewise, the link between the state form and globalization, imagined as antithetical, or the belief in the overcoming of capitalism without collective and physical action to replace it, are shown to be unhelpful in understanding the present and the horizon of possible courses of action. This transitional quality of the historical moment, due to its compressed intensity, challenges the consistency of theoretical frameworks whose fragility goes unnoticed in quiet times. This article criticizes some of the predominant conceptions of the State, the relationship with society and globalization, in counterpoint with the heavy reality of the events that took place.

Keywords: State - Globalization - Pandemic - Community

For the first time in human history, vast numbers of people across the world have agreed to abandon their paid activities, to stop attending public gatherings, and confine themselves in their homes for weeks and months. We are living in a kind of general planetary strike which has paralyzed most of the transport, commerce, production, and services.

People have accepted confinement when asked to do so by their state institutions which justify the measure as a way to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Two relevant questions, in the face of this planetary social fact, are, 1) how has it been possible for people to abruptly agree to suspend most of their paid work and their recreational and social activities in light of this call of the State? And, even more intriguing, 2) how is it possible that the State, which is supposed to be subordinate to reproducing the capitalist economic order,¹ decides to suspend the expanded reproduction of capital, placing health “above economic accumulation”? The answer which says that this is a decision aimed at “maintaining the reproduction of capitalism in the long term” assumes

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¹ Bonnet 2017.

that governments are in command of the historical consciousness of capitalism. How is it that the US and British governments initially acted as the opposite of that historical consciousness? These are inconsistent responses that presuppose an intention prior to the factual reality of the events and, whose logic leads, in the end, to suppose that breathing is also a way of ““guaranteeing the reproduction of capital.””

In fact, most of our definitions of what the State is do not help us understand this extraordinary reality that entirely involves the state relations. It is as if the crisis unleashed by COVID-19 had caused many of the categories with which we analyze reality to burst.

Certainly, information about the existence of a lethal disease first appeared in the media through medical specialists who explained about the dangerousness and speed of the spread of the virus detected in other countries. Since mid-January 2020, journalists, international health institutions, and academics² have been talking about different ways to contain the virus. They even mentioned the technique of confinement as an emergency response. However, these were comments without any binding force.

Even when the contagions began to appear in many countries, not even the alarm of specialists and opinion leaders resulted in voluntary confinement. People were waiting for the authorized voice of the government to agree to the extreme measure. In some countries such as the United States,³ Brazil,⁴ and England⁵ it happened that while all the recognized medical references raised immediate quarantine, their leaders opted for ambiguity or the refusal to implement isolation; it was recommended weeks later because of social pressure against government officials and workers against employers. Finally, the quarantine became effective, but only when the official authorities of the State decided to do so.

The state as a community

What power did the State use to achieve something apparently impossible, such as putting the brake on the maddened vertigo of modern societies? There is no doubt that the panic of the risk of death has catalyzed state efficiency. But compliance with the social isolation decreed by governments does not have to do only with the centralized information that they have, since the arguments they used to justify the

2 <https://www.who.int/es/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---COVID-19>.

3 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/05/worst-president-ever/>

4 <https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/coronavirus-jair-bolsonaro-critica-cuarentena-y-hace-lla-mado-a-los-brasilenos/664521>

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/30/five-already-dead-by-time-uk-reported-first-coronavirus-death>

quarantine had already been used previously by medical specialists and by other governments affected early by the virus, without this affecting the self-isolation of societies with still small numbers of infected people. So the idea that the power of the State is born from centralization or information advantage does not work.

It is clearly noted that the resources and personnel dedicated to centralizing society's information (on property, income, debts, crimes, on economic functioning, on social mobility or political activities, among others), make the state gear work, but they don't define it.

The Weberian monopoly regarding the monopoly of coercion⁶ does not help much either because closing factories or shops paralyzes the generation of family economic income for an entire society. It is a measure that interrupts the only source that people must guarantee their material means of life and blocks his personal career developed over decades. And for more than 3,000 million people⁷ to accept the temporary paralysis of their social destiny without any argument other than coercion and jail, it would require 3,000 million police and military to be behind each citizen, forcing them to comply with the quarantine, which is impossible. The social magnitude of global atrophy was so massive that no monopoly of coercion has the means or the personnel to impose it on its own. The addition of "legitimate" coercion is not enough either, because although a social tolerance to the centralized use of violence is required to force compliance decided by the government, it can only be exercised if it is applied to a part of society, for reasons of "public order" (subversion, delinquency, and others); it is unsustainable if it is applied to the whole of society since there is no longer a subject of legitimation that supports the use of coercion.

The Germanic legal tradition that focuses the power of the State on the existence of a legal order⁸ or on the associativity of political wills endowed with the power of domination,⁹ is not enough to explain the events either, since most of the current suspension of the social world has been done without the support of laws, and even in some cases, by suspending the constitutionally guaranteed right to travel. As it seldom happens, the law and the norms have been liquefied by the speed of political events without, for this reason, the legality of the State's decisions escaping the moral evaluation of the citizens. Today the law is starkly displayed, in the face of the health emergency, as a second-term consecrator of a relation of legality beliefs produced by the tolerances and licenses shared by most people.

6 Weber 1998.

7 Read: <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2020/03/25/mas-de-3000-millones-de-personas-instadas-a-confinarse-por-pandemia-balance-afp/>

8 Kelsen 1992

9 Jellinek 2017

Certainly, there is no State without a legal order, but it is not the legal order that gives rise to the State.

Jessop's proposal that the State is the set of institutions whose socially accepted function is to make binding decisions¹⁰ does not precisely explain the singularity of the current situation in which these State institutions are socially "allowed" to apply binding decisions. Where did that attribution come from? Who gave them that power and why? Bourdieu analyzes the same decisive element of the concentration of the basic consents of a society by proposing that, in addition to coercion, the "monopoly of symbolic violence"¹¹ is characteristic of the State form. Beyond the fact that the State is not the only source of symbolic violence (it is present in other social nodes such as business corporations, the family, and so on, the central issue is how the State managed and still manages to administer and permanently renovate its ability to define the dominant patterns with which society understands reality which, in turn, determines the way in which society relates to the State. Why does society allow this to happen? The reference to a harsh violence that is seen as the founder of an imposition that was later settled, forgotten, and updated as soft violence, reduces the power of the State to an old abuse, later forgotten, which would require falsehoods and updated impostures to maintain itself over time. And if, in addition, these types of violence are the only ones that the subordinate classes have to locate themselves in the world, we are facing a collective deception that is self-perpetuated by the action of the subordinates themselves. If the State was only a permanent deception, it would be enough to disillusion ourselves to make the State disappear, which is a naive reading of the reality of political power. And if the mental structures of the dominated are only an effect of domination, then the rebellions that break into history would be only an illusion.

There is no doubt that the State subjects society to logical and moral ways of ordering the world hierarchically with which the same society is linked to the State, instantly recognizing its authority; but this does not explain how societies have forced some States to decree quarantine when they did not wish to do so. If the monopoly of symbolic power were so constitutive, the mismatch between social beliefs and state emissions would not have occurred. The replacement of the instrumentalist reading of the State, which conceives it as a mere tool of the dominant classes, by an instrumentalism of mental structures, is powerless to explain the active presence of subordinates in the State and the grammatical quality of the logical, moral, and procedural precepts with which the dominated, in exceptional moments, locate themselves

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10 Jessop 2017

11 Bourdieu 2014, p.14, 174

and produce a social reality beyond the domination of the State and the dominated mental structures.

It is not enough, therefore, to find the nucleus of state functioning, neither in its monopolies of coercion, nor in dominated mental schemes nor in its territorially binding decisionism. It has to be found in the social authorization to be able to monopolize binding decisions.

The organization of the fear of death, produced by a microorganism of genetic material has, in this case, more elements of explanatory reason than the authority of the State.

Elías looks at the containment of externally induced fear of death as the articulating fact of the acceptance of the formation of the coercive and tributary monopolies of the modern State.¹² But this explanation is just applicable to the generation marked by permanent wars of territorial plunder; but it does not help to explain why state formation is reproduced by the actions and expectations of new generations distant from the din of extermination battles.

In the case of the current pandemic, the containment of the fear that it generates could have been channeled, for example, by the temporary purchase or rental of hospital spaces for those who have money, and the seclusion and repression of those who try to interfere with this allocation of care. In fact, this is the proper market response to a pandemic. But the most certain thing is that this response would have unleashed popular uprisings which would have posed a higher threat to wealthy families than that of contracting the virus.

The solution to this shared risk was then to demand and wait for a state solution. But why?

The State is a common belief in the protection of everybody through public resource. Before, it meant the expectation of collective protection against wars, invasions, violent death, and also the hope of a safeguard against collective misfortunes, economic catastrophes, losing positions. At this moment, the State represents the promise of protection against the risk of death from the virus.

It is in collective responses to constitutive fears (Duby¹³) where we can find decisive clues about the origins and functioning of States. But the State is not the same as fear. The fear of invasions, misery, the loss of possessions, the plague, allows a community of affected people to become a political community when everyone decides to accept a common way of organizing resources that allows to stop, mitigate, defeat imminent or perceived primary fears. It is not the fear or the defense against it what makes a political community. It is precisely the belief and the practical action of consolidating, or tolerating, an organization of

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12 Elías 1989, pp. 626-27

13 Duby 1995

common means to overcome this or other adversity that gives rise to a society's political moment.

Therefore it is not only a belief of collective goods for the common protection; it is also a material reality of organizing a form of management of the common (government, parliament, ministries, legal apparatus, permanent coercive apparatuses); it is a material reality of having resources and common goods for protection (initially taxes, then public goods, services, savings, among others), consequently, it is a way of directing the common; and it is also discursive ways of territorially delimiting the community of beliefs (school system, national identity, recognition systems, state legitimacies).

We are not facing any belief without verifiable materiality. They are performative beliefs that create the institutional and material order that they enunciate, but they are also beliefs derived from developing material realities. Therefore, they are beliefs of a type of political community validated by the territorial material realities. Hence, we can speak of the State, *at first*, as a political community of beliefs, tolerances, and actions on common life objectified by rights and common material resources arranged for that purpose. Those beliefs have a univocal binding effect on all the people of a specific territory.

For this reason, faced with the risk of death or catastrophe, the formative bond of associativity develops. This bond has been channeled and appropriated by the State form. Hence, when the members of society panic, they interpellate the State first: firm and effective measures of medical protection, a guarantee of access to basic services, food, support for economic activities, credits, donations, were some of the demands. The State arose from a demand for collective protection; each month society financially contributes to sustain it. The State guards the assets considered as common to all members of society and, accordingly, the State is the institution to which society turns to when there is a danger that threatens everyone.

No one can escape this principle of primary social protection, not even those who, days ago, demanded a reduction of the State to its minimum components and the final triumph of the markets over statist populism. Despite their arrogance and private wealth, they can't escape the fear of a democratic wave of contagion which may sweep everyone with relative equality.

However, beyond the constitutive fears that starkly reveal the core of the state relations, the State regularly functions as a material reality and normative belief because it manages socially shared and collectively owned resources, such as basic services like public health systems, official education, environment, natural resources, currency, citizen security, property protection, taxes, social savings, public companies and others. That is why the moments of greatest social cohesion or degree of adherence of society to state structures have occurred at the time of

the expansion of rights or at the moment of democratization of goods and public recognition obtained by the increase in the participation of the State in the generation of the Gross Domestic Product. In the case of the so-called welfare state of the last century, the world's States managed between 35% and 40% of national income.¹⁴

The budget cuts, the privatizations of public companies (in the areas of health or education), or the loss of monetary sovereignty that much of the world has experienced in the last 40 years, do not contradict this hypothesis of the source of state order; they show it in motion, as a process of expansion and reversibility. The fact is that the privatizations and cuts in social spending were never done in the name of making a few rich people richer (as in reality it happened); but under the slogan of saving society from supposedly "loss-making" public companies that only benefited some leaders; or in the case of health and education, because citizens deserve a more efficient educational and medical system, the result of competition between medical offers and the "free" choice of spending by citizens. In fact, this meant the medical abandonment of millions of people and the devaluation of public education in the labor market. But until these results were seen dramatically, there is no doubt that the ideology of "personal merit" or of enthusiasm for "free choice" or the illusion that everyone could enrich themselves by competing individually by being entrepreneurs, not only took hold as a popular prejudice, but as a certainty that it was the best way to "democratize wealth."

In this cultural environment, when the State itself dismantled its own wealth, it did so in the name of the State's protective social nature. It was said that it was the best way to guarantee the well-being of all. When the neoliberal rhetoric argued that a public company is inefficient because its revenues are always postponed and that it is better to be the private owner of a piece of that company or, better, to have tomorrow's profits in advance today, that same rhetoric was sustained by appealing to the benefit of all (which is the key to accessing state legitimacy); but now in an individual code or language that was no longer collective.

Thus, the privatization's time did not mean a displacement of the State, but a new form of State characterized by the decline of social rights, the expansion of its coercive actions, the reinforcement of its discursive functions and the class redistribution of its assets.

The State organized, defended, and legitimized the private expropriation of public property; it was the State that transferred funds from public debt into private hands; the State dismantled the worker's protective system; the State triggered inflation to punish wages and confiscated the contributions of pensioners; the that spent millions and millions of dollars to transform the logical, procedural, and moral schemes of society in line with competitive individualism and, of course,

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¹⁴ For the European and the North American case see, Piketty 2019, pp. 548-549

the containment of disgruntled social classes. Markets and private investors do not have the territorially binding force of official decisions and political legitimacies. That is what the State has and that is why the States were the essential organizational support of the global neoliberal hegemony.

This attempt of private expropriation of the public has been taken to the limit. It has been a reckless way of tempting the abyss because over time the substantive belief of the State as administrator of common goods empties of verifiable material content. That is something that is going to explode at the beginning of the 21st century in Latin America and now in the whole world.

The heralds of free market and “the global village”, today, in the face of the pandemic and the global economic recession, appear as fervent upstart Keynesians.¹⁵ It is clear that it is not an act of delayed repentance, but of strategic lucidity, since the social class in which they are grouped will also be affected in the volumes of their accumulative wealth, so it will require the State to relaunch it in the medium term. But also, the inevitable catastrophic mismatch between expectations of economic aid to popular sectors demanding collective welfare and the limited resources available can trigger protests that put a substantial part of their earnings, and even their own assets, at risk.

Thus, during catastrophes and the concentration of social expectations in government actions, the State initially appears as a political community of protection and collective direction sustained by rights, material resources, institutions, and beliefs around that protection. It is also constituted by a character binding and sovereign in a territory of the planet. It is a community of performative beliefs, community of collective material goods, community of institutions that organize the management of these ideas and common goods, thus give the State an ideal and material body. Therein lays the impulse of irresistibility or mode of social adherence of the State.

The community as a material illusion

But it is not an absolute community, it is a community that is organized by monopolies and in this paradox resides its determination as an artifact of domination and irresistible.

The state form exists because there are shared assets, but administered monopolistically by a specific segment, permanent or changeable, of society.

The shared ideas (moral, logical, procedural, and instrumental

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15 FinancialTimes (<https://www.ft.com/content/927d28e0-6847-11ea-a6ac-9122541af204>); European Comision's vicepresident (<https://www.expansion.com/economia/2020/04/09/5e8ee878468aebbb708b45ef.html>), France's president (Le monde, París, 13 de abril de 2020), England's prime minister (<https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20200701/482040665312/boris-johnson-medidas-reino-unido-crisis-coronavirus.html>), etc.

principles with which people develop their daily lives in an implicitly coordinated way with other people) are enunciated and administered in a monopolistic way by a reduced piece of society, in exclusive formats, called official enunciation of the State. The public force protects property (large, small, material or incorporated as a labor force) but it is a specialized force, permanent and dependent on the government executive, that assigns itself the exclusivity of handling violence. The parliament gives normative body to the legal structure of the society, but it monopolizes the exclusivity of the deliberation with obligatory effect in all the territory of sovereignty. All taxes are paid as a basis for shared funds, but it is managed monopolically by a centralized bureaucracy that assigns by its own decision, and according to specific interests, the ways and use of these public funds. The public investment and the indebtedness that involves the destiny of at least two generations establishes expenses for all, but who of “all” will benefit the most and who will be hired to execute that disbursement, is decided monopolically by the State.

Public health and education are available to all members of society, but the available resources, the quality of the services, the educational contents are decided by a group of officials who have glances committed to certain factions of the society. The ideas about the official identity, the official language, the rituals of representation of the collective and the imagination of the nationality itself are monopolized in their construction by small intellectual blocks articulated around government resources, which will use that same molecular irradiation of the State to universally consecrate that particular way of seeing or signifying history and the world. The public wealth available to society in a collective, social and natural way, are there to be usufruct by all in the form of rights; but the way of distributing the usufruct is monopolically organized, regulated and justified by a governmental apparatus that will prioritize access to some sectors to the detriment of others, or will improve the opportunities to access some resources over others. As Marx well pointed out in relation to the state centralization of the requirements of life in common in the nineteenth century, “Every common interest was immediately severed from the society, countered by a higher, general interest, snatched from the activities of society's members themselves and made an object of government activity – from a bridge, a schoolhouse, and the communal property of a village community, to the railroads, the national wealth, and the national University of France.”¹⁶ The point is how the state form is the historical process of a double monopolization: on the one hand, centralization or appropriation of the needs of life in common, of common resources, of the common efforts of a society; and on the other, monopolization of the monopolies that can be had in a delimited territorial environment.

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16 Marx 1980a, p. 253

The State always involves all members of society and their common ties, hence it's territorially binding quality. But by doing it in a way that is monopolized by the State administrators, it will do so by prioritizing, favoring, guaranteeing, protecting, and expanding certain interests of one part of society over others, of the economically dominant classes over the rest of the social classes.

Special rules, complex procedures, deadlines, guarantees, temporalities, seals, administrative labyrinths, all that universe of bureaucratic micro-powers used to simulate impartiality actually create a dark tunnel at the end of which the privileges are distributed as a result of an "administrative neutrality." Bureaucratic procedures are quite sophisticated technologies that transmute specific wills into universal ones. This labyrinth becomes even more complex if we also take into account that state monopolies are not fully pyramidal, but also present horizontal divisions between the legislative power and the executive power; between the executive power and the judicial power; within the executive power there are sub-monopolies with their relative autonomies and specialized liturgies, such as the armed forces, the intelligence services (that function as a quasi-sovereign State within the state); and vertically, between the different ways of territorial decentralization of power, which enable among all, another space of internal struggles of the State to expand their respective monopolies. In a certain way, the State is also a fragmented political world in multiple nuclei of power that demand agreements and concessions to act in coordination at certain times and on specific issues.

Saving the differences of geographical dimension and issues involved, the State is a power relation (such as the family, the church, or the market) where interests, views, criteria, and particular actions are transmuted into interests, looks, criteria, and universal actions to everybody. But there is a difference, the State has a territorialized power with the ability to demarcate or, if it is necessary, interfere in the management of the other powers.

This magical and mysterious faculty of making every particular become a universal with just a touch comes from the way of instrumentalizing this paradoxical reality of being a monopoly of common goods and resources. Then, the community dimension of the State is inverted as decisionism of the few over the goods of the many. Hence the State is a failed communitarianism. That is the reason why Marx defined the State as an "illusory community."¹⁷

17 Further, the division of labour implies the contradiction between the interest of the separate individual or the individual family and the communal interest of all individuals who have intercourse with one another. And indeed, this communal interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as the "general interest," but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labour is divided (...) And out of this very contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community the latter takes an independent form as the State, divorced

And it is by this constitutive political mediation of the State that the common rights in order to be instituted, exercised, or applied have to be regulated by a structure of class social influences.

Of course, a state right is an individual power applicable to all members of a society without any discrimination, but class influence is present from the moment of selection of powers. It is not the same to convert free health into a right (that will require a gigantic investment and will mainly benefit the most humble) than to institute the right to remit the profits abroad (which, although it is a power exercisable by anyone, in fact it will only favor a handful of foreign companies). Or, in the legal drafting of the same right, it is very different if (in its specifications, characteristics, requirements, deadlines, and procedures) it has integrated reparations to those affected, has put conditions for its application, has taken into account favorable conditions for some to the detriment of others. In other words, it is very different if in the legal drafting of a law are compressed the intense hierarchical conflagration of interest of diverse social classes and class segments..

Each law and state decree has inscribed in the wording of each paragraph a compressed summary of the hierarchies of interests and political, economic and cultural influences that the different sectors of society have in the state bureaucracy in particular and in the State in general. Legality is thus a compilation of the interests and capacity for pressure possessed by social classes in the State, and which, therefore, exercise state power, state domination. The fact that in capitalist societies, the holders of great fortunes have much more power of influence than the rest of the social classes, is deduced from three relational components: firstly, from their ownership of larger volumes of the modern "general representative of wealth" (money) that allows them to reach more effectively influence in the different segments of the State: the presidency, the judiciary branch, the Armed Forces and the intermediate administration of the bureaucracy. This effectiveness can be seen in the financing of certain party's campaign, the shared business with elected officials, the proximity to inside information in exchange for money and the bribery for administrative or legal decision-making.

The second influence comes strictly from the administrative materiality of the State itself. Insofar as it is just a few people who make executive decisions, who consider the democratization of dispositions a waste of time or efficiency and, in general, these are individuals whose

from the real interests of individual and community, and at the same time as an illusory communal life, always based, however, on the real ties existing in every family and tribal conglomeration – such as flesh and blood, language, division of labour on a larger scale, and other interests – and especially, as we shall enlarge upon later, on the classes, already determined by the division of labour, which in every such mass of men separate out, and of which one dominates all the others. It follows from this that all struggles within the State, the struggle between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another. Marx 1980b, p. 14, 30,

sediment of experiences and world of obvious options is similar to those of the experiences and habits of those who also monopolize decisions about the fate of private companies and fortunes, then immediately generate a logical and procedural affinity of monopolies and State actions with the monopolies of business leaders.

And thirdly, if the entire life trajectory of society, of the disadvantaged subordinate classes, is framed by a set of logical ways of organizing production and material exchanges based on the logic of market value, if their daily actions take private property to be an innate evidence of reality and if, in addition, the horizon of future expectations is guided by the continuity of the fundamental structures of the prevailing order, then the elected rulers (the administrative bureaucracy of the State, regardless of their political affiliation) would have no cause to depart from the ways of thinking and acting which are guided by the dominant reason that already dictates the order of things, ideas, and the common sense of society.

If the state is a political form of society and society, in its real and imagined life, is embedded in the predominant order of capitalist relations, there is a structural complicity between a part of the possible courses of action adopted by the rulers (problems they see, the solutions they pose) and the prevailing courses of action and the possibilities that the capitalist economy drives. It is a collusion of class interests that does not require any coercion because it coincides with the dominant beliefs shared by all members of society about how the world should be generally organized. However, this collusion is not an equality of interest between actions of the State and capitalist relations because the nature of the State is founded on the production, centralization, and management of common resources and the capitalist relations of production are not. The common goods of society are the last limit that prevents the State from being an epiphenomenon or a mere derivation of the capitalist logic of mercantile value. Therefore, what happens is that there are the social coalitions that are formed to govern a state to cut these common goods (neoliberal regimes) and there are those which try to expand them (different forms of social, social democratic, “populist” leftist coalitions).

A variant of this structural collusion is F. Block's proposal of “business confidence,”¹⁸ considered as the mechanism by which capitalists influence government decisions, since their private investments affect employment rates, in the generation of wealth and, with it, the electoral popularity of the ruling coalition itself. This is a materialistic and practical reading of how the business classes intervene in state policies without the need to be directly present.

However, it is insufficient to explain the influence in the exceptional moments in which left or progressive forces take over the administration

of the State. In fact, the exceptionality of revolutionary leftist governments comes from the exceptionality of the moment, which is generally characterized by a crisis of the old party system, by a crisis of the prevailing system of ideas and, above all, by a crisis of the model economic dominant until then, which leads voters to demand new directions beyond the broken normality. Otherwise they would not have voted for the left. In these circumstances of social availability, governments depend much less on private investment to maintain their electoral support, and have at their disposal a vast menu of governmental tools, and social support, to regulate inflation through economic planning processes, increase the public investment, improve employment, selectively collect more taxes, nationalize large, highly profitable companies, promote other forms of social ownership of companies, etc. The one who does not dare to do so is not so much a structural limit as a mental and political limit of a left that in reality renounces being one. What there will be in that case will be a collusion of cultural horizons that leads these types of rulers to the same questions, and the same answers, as those of the economically dominant classes.

Rulers cannot pose problems whose solution is not emerging in the course of society itself. A left-wing government cannot be required to implement socialism in circumstances in which the course of collective reflection by society and the concrete actions of the subaltern classes have not actually raised these possibilities. In these circumstances, a left coalition should expand the commons goods, shore up new rights, distribute wealth, reduce inequalities, etc., but it will not be able to decree socialism. It is not enough to invoke socialism or communism many times or to nationalize all private services to overcome the logic of capitalism. That is the frustrating lesson of all the revolutions of the 20th century. Given this, the best bet to crack the coexistence of collective expectations with the capitalist horizon will be to promote the growing democratization of binding decisions (of the executive measures of the State) while waiting for this to awaken, in the debates and expectations of the classes popular, new courses of action possible beyond the framework of capitalist relations of production. In the end, the possibility that a revolutionary government can go beyond the social management of capitalist relations of exploitation will also depend on the impulse of the popular classes to consider different modes of organization of the economy, property and the use of wealth.

It is therefore no coincidence that every time Marx referred to communism as a new society capable of overcoming capitalism, he did so in terms of a “real movement which abolishes the present state of things” whose conditions of possibility are “of this movement result from the premises now in existence.”¹⁹

Returning to the relation between state organization and dominant classes, it is clear then that it is always a fluctuating relation of mediations

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18 Bock 2020.

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19 Marx 1980b, p.16; Marx 1981, pp. 564-569 Marx & Engels, 1988.

that require permanent framing processes. It is not a direct relation since it must permanently preserve its quality as administrator of common goods and rights to continue exercising its attraction and recognition by the rest of society.

The state monopoly is, therefore, the scene where a political economy of the construction of rights unfurls that prioritizes, hierarchizes, promotes, makes viable or segments some of them, and contains, slows down, hinders or repeals others. This is what can be called the “material condensation” of the state’s correlation of social forces,²⁰ which is the social substance of which state acts are composed. It is not that the State exists and then the different forces are involved in it hierarchically. The State itself is a living and moving hierarchy of the network of correlation of social forces that varies historically in its composition, depending on which group or social class is able to postulate its particular interests by integrating the interests of the rest of society; that is, to understand the social alchemy of the particular in the universal. For this reason, there is no class State in the sense that it belongs to it as property; because it only exists as a social reality if it integrates the care, wealth, and expectations of all; therein lies the source of its practical necessity and moral legitimacy. Likewise, there is no condensed social “correlation of forces” as a State-form having an only force, because in that case, the State would be the property of a class and the logic of its authority over the other classes could only be perpetual violence. That which belongs to a class is the leadership, the administration, the dominant beliefs, that is, the organizational and imagined materiality of the leadership of the state.

The historical processes of monopoly construction that continuously crystallize the social power correlations do not fracture the State precisely because it is done in the name of the primary statehood principle, which is the protection of common goods and rights. And it is through this inversion of the common that state power is established and, therefore, the struggle for state power.

Monopolies are a form and processes of appropriation of what belongs to everyone, but it is done in the name of protecting those assets of everyone. It is an illusion, but it is a well-founded illusion objectively sustained by the persistence of these common goods. For this reason, we speak of an “illusory community” because what it is common remains concentrated in a few hands as the capacity to command and direct those goods or sometimes as the private property of a part of them. For all these reasons, the State can be defined as a form of procedural organization of collective resources, collective needs, common beliefs, and the rights of a society through decision monopolies with binding effect on a territory.

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20 Poulantzas 1979.

Rather, it is the way to organize the common life of a society, through territorially binding monopolies.

The fascination that the State provokes comes from its paradoxical condition of being for everybody, but administered by a few; of having control over the common resources of society, but bestowing the monopoly of their management on a few; of producing universal effects, but from particular decisions; to articulate all its citizens, but consolidating the domination of a class. Every state involves all the people of a society; It involves them from the payment of taxes, compliance with the rules, from the simplest things such as traffic rules or the most complex ones such as the use of an official paper as a general representative of wealth. In this sense, no one escapes the state relation, not even the most remote agrarian community or the most persistent anarchist. When we use money, when property is registered, when we send our children to school, when taxes are paid, when a right is exercised or when the struggle develops to extend rights, a part of the actions are always framed in a state logic of life in common. We are all in the State, we all participate in it because there is a part of everyone that is in the State. But this does not mean that we are on an equal footing. Some, the few, are in the position of decision-makers; they are the ones who exercise the monopoly. While others, the majority, feed the state fabric and have a capacity to influence (directly proportional to their resources such as monetary, cultural, political, family and inversely proportional to their class population density) the State. We are all traversed by the state fabric, by its correlation of forces, feeding it deliberately or unconsciously. But only those who run state monopolies can claim state representation.

In this blindness that can’t see the constitutive presence of the subaltern classes in the state relations lays the theoretical error and the practical impotence of all the instrumentalist readings of the State. They not only construct a magical image of the State as a thing, as a hammer in the hands of the bourgeoisie for the domination of an inert people, as a mere object of history. In addition, this reading awards to the monopoly and property of the ruling classes all that enormous set of struggles, resources, and means produced by work and nature which are a patrimony of all; which is a great relief to them. This perspectives can’t understand that the State is in the first place a way of relating between all people, it is a social relation, therefore, domination is a social fabric subject to correlation of forces capable of being modified, or dismantled, depending on the variation of that correlation of forces.

In summary, the State will never be an absolute socialized socio-political reality, a real community, because always, even in moments of maximum protagonist and leader presence of the popular classes in the State, there will be a sector that monopolizes the command. But at the same time, it will never be an absolute private monopoly, because the

state reality only works if there are common goods, rights and wealth that incorporate the subaltern classes.

What can happen depending on the historical contexts is that each of these two trends (real socialization or class privatization) approach their maximum expression, but without being absolute, like the asymptotes of a parabola or the ends of the arms of a horseshoe. Thus, it is possible to say that the more community of decisions, the less state monopoly; and the more monopoly of decisions, the less social presence in them. In a certain way, revolutions can be seen as a breakdown of social adherence that produces the imagination and the reality of commonality among all members of society. When those “above” abandon the pretense of having common things with those “below”; and those “below” see in their lives that they have nothing in “common” with those “above”, a revolutionary epoch arises which, in principle, is a new moral experience of the logic and procedures of the immediate world.

Cohesive State Monopoly

Among all the state monopolies that are being built over time, there is one that, without having a heavy institutionalized material burden, in a certain way unifies all of them. We are talking about words and ideas with political power, that is: they influence all members of society in an irresistible and binding way. It is not only about the symbolic violence to which Bourdieu refers and which makes people think and act in relation to the State and society with the parameters that the State itself has arbitrarily instituted as schemes of practical understanding of reality; but also about the performative capacity of institutions²¹ that possess those ideas and words.

We are referring to the capacity of official statements made by official state representatives to become objectively state actions that are territorially binding. This is the case of a law, decree, or presidential instruction that, once issued, immediately becomes a mountain of reports, studies, procedures, financial disbursements, labour activities, institutional events, all of which have practical effects on society as a whole.

Whether it is a new investment, the contracting of a public debt, the approval of a new law, a whole machinery of actions, beliefs, and material consequences is put into operation to implement it. The state is one of those few places where the idea and the official word become social materiality; where the world of ideas precedes the material world with lasting effects on the whole of society. These are relations of domination by acts of government decision.

Beliefs with power therefore produce two forms of domination: by induction, when by state authority they reveal and inhibit certain possible

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21 Searle 1997, p.113

courses of action that society might choose; and by decision, when the words of the state create a reality that is obligatory for everyone, including sometimes next generations, as in the case of public debts, wars, trade agreements, among others.

It is clear that this truth-effect and social matter contained in the state enunciations, have no force by themselves, as enunciations. They are only a wish if they are said by any normal citizen, and just declarations of an intention without power, if they are expressed by a public official as a comment. In order to have an effect of power they need to be enunciated from a specific place, the State, and within the framework of the official ritual and liturgy of the State. It is a power delegated through the formal system of hierarchies and influences of State's spaces. It is for this effectiveness, versatility and impact that it is one of the most precious assets for which political blocs with State ambitions compete.

But this monopoly also closes the circle of beliefs as a substantive political force. As we already mentioned, beliefs firstly came from society towards the political community as expectations of protection and rights. But now, beliefs are imposed from the State to society to impose themselves, no longer as ideas of society over itself, but rather as ideas of something that appears different from society because it monopolizes social things. This is the political fetishism of the state as a social reality.

It is, however, an incomplete or failed fetishism, as all fetishisms finally are, including that of the commodity. There is always a space for social beliefs about the State that do not come from the State, but from the society that has objectively opted for the protection and the rights to common goods. There are common material things that are in the State and, although they are managed to favor primarily a few, they also favor, partially, everybody. It is the principle of material reality of beliefs about the State – about its legitimacy and the tolerance of its arbitrariness, without which the power of the State would be an artifice, a ruse that would have no objective communitary foundation. Fetishisms always have fragilities, gaps, through which the verifiable materiality of the fetishized power itself filters.

Moreover, the force of belief-induction of the State power is not entirely its own force, emerging only from the State relations. In fact, it is a force of beliefs that is sustained on the utilisation or colonization by the State of other nodes of production of loyalties, other social institutions and non-state power relations, but which at specific moments and on specific issues are coupled by the discursive emissions of the State to replicate, amplify or validate them. These include the family, the churches, “public opinion”, the media, private research centres, civic associations, and companies, which are private centres that generate collective beliefs, to which the state establishes thematic interfaces of mutual benefit based on the established order; in such a way that these institutions make use of the state to territorially irradiate their precepts, while the

state makes use of the clientele of these private institutions to expand its own discourse. This is a coupling of legitimacies that allows the State to add to its public legitimacy the legitimacy of these private institutions, giving rise to a type of “externalisation” of the production of government political legitimacy.

The state does not encompass the whole of society, but temporarily and thematically makes use of the whole of society to impose its aims and objectives.

It is in this way that we have to understand the Gramscian definition of the State as “political society + civil Society” or “private “ organisms of hegemony.²² State is therefore sometimes civil society to the extent that it supports, drives, or uses power relations and civil society institutions differentiated from the State to produce a dense network of cognitive assemblages that function as a structure.

These are the discourses and logics of patriarchal power, or the despotic relations of the factories, or the racist prejudices of a part of society, or, if necessary, the solidarity impulses of the trade unions and communities, or the proposals for social equality from centers of knowledge production, or in general, the pieces of “common sense” with which, for certain governmental purposes, the State links up to create a dominant common sense. This turns state issuing into social prejudice, giving the government greater legitimacy to act monopolistically in the direction of that collective prejudice.

This interdependence between the state and “common sense” should not lead us to confuse one with the other. State does not have a monopoly on common sense, because if it did, there would no longer be a civil society, instead it would be a self-referral of the State itself. The State is one of the producers of common sense to the extent that it sediments in society logical, moral and instrumental modes of long term life in common governed by the State; but there are more or less expanded areas of social life, such as the trade union, neighborhoods, companies, churches, the media, political groups, cultural institutions that create their own logic of action, their own socially and classically segmented moral judgments, which, over time, also create common sense. When the two constructions overlap, we have the dominant common sense.

Thus, the strength of the State has a source of renewed feedback in the very strength of civil society, which shows it as an ideal-material reality in movement, in a permanent process of construction. And precisely for this reason, because of these continuous renewals of the discourses of civil society, which are the result of molecular modifications of the correlations of forces within it, there are or can be logics of action, moral evaluations of things that exceptionally go beyond the State’s logic

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22 Gramsci 1981-2000.

and that, on their own, create different ways of imagining what is common in society; new forms of sectorial organization of the handling of common problems and that, over time, could dispute the structure of order, the social hierarchies and beliefs existing in the State. In this exceptionality lie the shaping of mobilized social forces, which bring with them new common meanings, and other possible horizons of action that could have a transformative effect on the State.

In the end, the moral, logical, procedural, and instrumental schemes with which people adapt the whole of their world of practical actions to the dominant world have a functional duality: on the one hand, they function as a structure of regularities that enables an infinite but delimited space of possible options of action and imagination, in correspondence with the position in which the pre-existing and dominant social order has placed each person according to his or her origin and social trajectory. But on the other hand, and this is decisive for breaking out of domination, they function as a grammatical order of senses capable of producing, in exceptional circumstances such as those provoked by the pandemic and the world economic crisis, modes of combination and signification that go beyond, or further, up or down, the dominant order, making visible different possible courses of action than those of the mere reproduction of the dominant order.

That is also why hegemony is a way of articulating intellectual and moral leadership in society with the political direction of the State. Although the hegemony that is capable of developing a power block in the State goes from the “top” to the “bottom” in civil society, and the hegemony that builds an alternative social block is initially built interstitially from civil society; this fragmented course of hegemony can only be unified and fully realized from the State, because, at the end of the day, the State is the political commons that societies have. Thus, hegemony is much more than a mere discursive challenge, or a linguistic ability of a political project. From the government, it is a way of organizing the common material and imagined resources of a country. The political opposition proposes a different way of organizing the handling and use of these common resources, with the immediate effect of creating a practical and active new associativity of society itself, which assumes this result as a new common resource.

This allows us to understand the limits and restrictions that the progressive and revolutionary processes face when they reach the government. They usually do it in times of State crisis, which enables them to carry out a set of collective activities and availabilities that transform the correlation of political force, allowing them a series of initiatives of structural change, which are moderate in the case of emerging from electoral victories or radical when they are the result of insurrectional processes. But in both cases, the other spaces of social, economic, industrial, financial, and commercial power, and the very

burden of multiple components of the former common sense, which have not yet been affected by the cognitive crisis that accompanies every State crisis, impose an enclosure on the actions of the new governments. This is a material and ideological conservative power that, emerging from outside the State, seeks first to constrain, then to reverse, the governmental decisions of the newly emerging social bloc and, finally, to recover the direction of State power by any means. The restraint or defeat of these conservative forces is not only a matter of administrative decisionism, but above all, of articulating state actions with social force mobilized also outside the State, carrying the class struggle itself into each of these spaces of non-State power, starting with the factories, the enterprises, and also many of the very collective habits of the subordinate classes, inherited and sedimented by decades or centuries of domination. These are the moments that no longer reveal the State as the culmination or synthesis of political struggles, but as a result of society's own political qualification.

New scenes of State and society

The pandemic has revealed the basic composition of the state relations by presenting it as the only and last social space of protection against the risk of death and economic catastrophe. International organizations and global markets have abdicated their prerogatives in relation to the State; globalised production is collapsing and companies are lining up to take refuge in public debt. The institutions that once drew on the creation of globalization over the State are now extending their hands in search of government benefits.

This is not a triumphant return, and certainly not a rebirth of the State, which as we saw, was part of the driving force behind the implementation of neoliberalism.

What is happening now is a moment of historical inflection that opens a new phase in the processes of stateisation of social life.

And it has been so since the moment in which the State has had the power to paralyse capitalist accumulation of profits in most of the world.

Stopping is not the same as replacing capitalism, but even so, the fact that the State has been able to temporarily suspend capitalist production, in some cases under social pressure as in England and the United States, speaks not only of a kind of State power rarely seen, but also of its limits because there are moments when society can impose itself on the State. In fact, today in some countries, the very relaxation of the care measures facing the pandemic or, in some cases, the lack of awareness, are emerging from sectors of civil society above State decisions.

The dispute over the fundamental State monopoly

However, the quality of the era that has opened up is that of a State which is required in its role as protector of people and financier of economic resources to mitigate the economic recession.

Immediately between 5% and 30% of the countries' GDP has been mobilized in the form of new public debt and guarantees.²³ This is the beginning of a series of recurrent debts that will increase in the following months. In reality, the monopoly of fiscal expenses and public debt is the fundamental monopoly of the State that drives the movement of the other monopolies; and this will be the most visible at least during the time of repayment of the loan. A real planetary dispute for the economic surplus of an uncertain destiny is under way, exposed to intense social struggles.

As the State's income will decrease substantially due to the fall of taxes, caused by the paralysis of production, three will be the social subjects that will dramatically tense the correlation of forces to determine the uses of the new resources and to distribute the historical costs of this debt: the wealthy classes, popular sectors and the State's bureaucracy that absorbs between 10% and 30% of the labour force in most countries of the world.²⁴

Given this, States will oscillate between one of the asymptotes of the State parable or the arms of the horseshoe consisting of more social democratization or more monopoly. Whether the State's performance is inclined towards one or the other pole must depend on the class struggles that strengthen its presence and its power of influence on the administrators of the State monopolies. And it is not only a question of which social bloc is or will be exercising State power, because of electoral victories or coups d'état. It will also depend on the strategic ability to influence other blocks and social segments with the capacity to mobilize and to produce discourse, which, as we have seen, can direct the actions of the State without necessarily being a block of power.

The subprime mortgage crisis of 2008 or the commodity crash of 2015-2016 show that extraordinary public resources can be transferred to the business elites to buy back stocks, raise private profits and nationalize deficits, all in the name of the common good, but cutting rights and stability for the majority. This happened where governments were neoliberal, society was demobilized and the cultural environment of Darwinian competitiveness prevailed. Today, facing greater losses in corporate profitability and higher volumes of debt, it will not be different if the three conditions mentioned above are maintained. For example, most of the two trillion dollars provided by the US State are destined to serve as liquidity for the repurchase of stocks and grants to private companies.

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23 International Monetary Fund (IMF), Fiscal Policies for a Transformed World, July 10, 2010.

24 OCDE, Government at a Glance 2019; BID, *Panorama de las administraciones públicas América Latina y el Caribe 2020*

Whereas social aid is not meant to be an amplification of rights, but rather to temporarily avoid indigence increasing. Meanwhile, the central banks of each state, are tending to play the role of a risk insurance for large private investments, instead of democratizing current and future resources, which belong to everyone, by means of a universal income, universal health or the cancellation of family debts.

For the capitalists, this is a new form of class patrimonialization of public goods, which inevitably, in order to be sustained, has to be accompanied by new forms of social discipline, and strategies to contain popular discontent regarding these unjust distributions of public resources. The racialization of social dangers, together with the control of the pandemic through the monopolization of all the digitalized acts of people, will begin to be used in algorithmic political control and induction from the State. An example of this, and without much sophistication, is what has been happening in the midst of the quarantine in Bolivia, where the use of public goods as a class patrimony or a prolongation of property, together with the imprisonment of people who protest through social networks, has been more successful than the containment of the virus.

But where the correlation of political forces is inclined towards the popular sectors, where there are progressive governments and public opinion tending towards policies of equality, public resources are probably reasserting old social rights and extending them to new ones. In any case, an age of widespread social discontent has opened up where the deprivations of the subordinate classes will intensify with the loss of the aesthetic effect of the crisis mitigation actions. And the way in which this discontent is articulated with collective action and a horizon of possibilities will give the progressive or regressive quality of history.

In fact, the second relevant aspect of the new historical moment is that given the global cognitive stupor of conservative thinking vis-à-vis the speed of the pandemic and the paralysis of production, the ideas and proposals developed marginally within left-wing groups appear to be the only platforms of action that are feeding public debates and the decisions of States regarding the COVID-19 and the economic crisis, including right-wing governments.

Economic protagonism of the State, increased public investment, cancellation of the payment of the foreign debt, elimination of bank interest payments for small savers, universal basic income, social ecology, short-value chains and reindustrialization in essential areas, selective protectionism, nationalization of strategic economic activities, wealth distribution to reduce inequalities, extension of social rights, demercantilization of health, repatriation of fortunes from tax havens, planetary tax on transnational corporations for a universal health network, etc., proposals made years ago by the left and practiced in a partial way by progressive Latin American governments, which were accused of being irresponsible populists, now turn out to be the minimum

platform for public debate, for actions by the states and for a new planetary common sense.

This is the third relevant aspect of the moment: the porosity of society's ways of thinking, representing and acting which are generally highly resilient to change. The dominant schemes of locating oneself in the world, of judging the actions of people who accompanied the 40 years of neoliberalism, are now paralyzed by fear and catastrophic risks; people are stunned to ensure lasting certainties in this social order which is becoming increasingly unstable and chaotic. Governments and the dominant centers of discursive broadcasting are shocked by the sum of crises that are increasing over the months. The contingency of history, which always existed but was hidden behind a triumphalist mantle of free market, privatization, and globalization as the naturalized destiny of humanity, is today shown in all its unpredictability. And as the inevitable collective suffering caused by the pandemic and economic hecatomb increases in the coming months, an exceptional moment of collective willingness to revoke old beliefs, to replace aged certainties, to listen, to process new understandings, and new procedural and moral reasons for the organization of personal life and the world is becoming possible. It is a moment of propensity to some kind of cognitive epiphany capable of giving the imagined world a stable sense of destiny to engage the meaning of personal decisions; a period of collective desire towards new signifiers to stabilize each individual's world order.

But this willingness to revoke beliefs enables a range of options for all sides: from more authoritarian and unjust horizons to more communitarian horizons or, at the other extreme, to escape into magical and providential havens of "just punishment" to set humanity straight. It will not be long before this cognitive opening of society, this reconfiguration of common sense, is closed, giving way to a new long period of predominant logical, moral, and instrumental representations.

Facing this, critical thinking and the left-wing have a political obligation to help building a new common sense for a different way of organizing life in common both now and in the future, strongly based on justice, equality, permanent democratization, and community. For the moment, it has an ephemeral advantage which, in time, can be a burden, since its ideas mark the axis of generalized discussion on how to confront the crisis. But the demand for possible horizons of action is much greater than what has been proposed so far; and what is worse, there is a growing expropriation of their ideas by conservative and reactionary forces which, while inevitably distorting them, may take away the historical initiative from the left. The aperture to State spending, the extraordinary public indebtedness of governments previously proud of their strict fiscal discipline, is not a matter of conviction but of convenience for their own particular interests. The most certain thing is that a reduction in the costs of the wage bill will be achieved through state subsidies to the workers,

as long as the cash flows assigned by the State to capital are translated entirely into profits and not into investments.

The fact that late neo-liberalism wraps itself up in fragments of progressive thinking and appeals to certain protectionist measures, is suspicious to say the least. It is a rushed ideological transformism that, beyond being justified in an attempt to mobilize State resources for the revitalization of private accumulation, speaks of a disorder of the old cognitive order that sustained the neoliberal regime for 40 years.

Globalization and the Nation State, free markets and protectionism, exchange value and use value.

One of the functions of crises is to reveal the pathetic reality of things. Since March 2020, when the COVID-19 was expanded to the entire planet, we have seen not only the world markets being silenced, but also States clearly demarcating their frontiers to declare quarantines, closing their airports to foreigners and assuming differentiated health policies against the virus. Global media and opinion leaders, who not so long ago were pontificating about the successes of globalisation, could not hide the humiliation caused by seeing European governments confiscate medical supplies at their national borders in order to attend to their populations. The World Health Organization (WHO) condemns an immoral “vaccine nationalism” and claims for socialize data and results. Like a castle of dry leaves, the imagined globalization was collapsing in the face of the priorities of individual States that regarded their neighbors as a risk. It took a global panic to break down in a couple of months the triumphalist and sophisticated ideology of market globalization as the final destination of humanity. The states were there; they had always been there despite their invisibility in the discourse of the globalist narrative.

The fact is that the national state and globalization are not antagonistic, nor are protectionism and free trade. They are components of an economic-political reality that will weigh more heavily on one another, depending on the moment in the historical cycle, and yet one will not be able to impose itself definitively on the other. And in the transitional moments of the historical cycle, such as the present one, an amphibious reality occurs that makes elements of free trade coexist with growing elements of protectionism, forces of globalization with an ascending presence of the Nation-State protagonism.

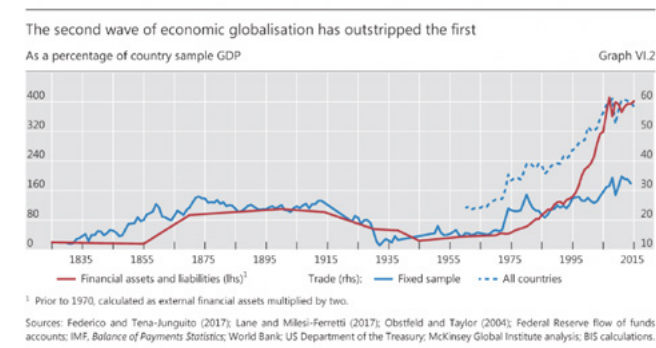
Signs of this epochal change are already visible in the immediate aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, when cross-border capital flows, which were one of the jewels of globalization and which grew from 5% of world GDP in 1989 to 20% in 2007, have since fallen by around 5%.²⁵ Similarly, global trade, which had been growing at two to three times the rate of world GDP since 1980, began to slow down to match

²⁵ McKinsey Global Institute, “The New Dynamics of Financial Globalization”, Agosto de 2017.

the rate of GDP growth.²⁶ The Brexit period followed, putting an end to the unity of the European continent. In turn, the election of Trump in the USA has sparked off a battery of protectionist measures for the United States, contrary to the neoliberal decalogue that had characterized his predecessors since Ronald Reagan. He has withdrawn the United States from the Trans-Pacific Economic Cooperation Agreement which was intended to unite all the economies that border the Pacific Ocean in the logic of free trade; he has established a set of sanctions on US companies that wish to relocate their industries to other countries with lower wages; he is building a long and threatening wall on his southern border to prevent Latin-Americans from “taking” jobs from Americans, and is embarking on a trade war with China which, despite the recent January agreement, applies to \$360 billion in Chinese imports.²⁷ In addition, German companies are increasingly confronted with China over market protection on “security”²⁸ grounds. As a result, the drive to use state borders to get rid of competitors is tending to spread throughout the world.

For all these reasons, it is most likely that in the next decade we will witness a recovery of the protagonism of state forms, not only due to the economic effects of the pandemic, but also because of the cyclical dynamics of some components of historical capitalism, verified by multiple studies,²⁹ including those of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) and summarized in this graph (1).³⁰

Graph 1



²⁶ Organización Mundial del Comercio (OMC), “La fortaleza del crecimiento económico dependerá de las decisiones políticas”, 12 de abril de 2018, “Examen estadístico del comercio mundial 2020”, julio de 2020.

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-51129740>

²⁸ Ver los justificativos de la empresa Telefónica para dejar de lado a Huawei en la instalación del sistema 5G: https://www.eldiario.es/tecnologia/ericsson-desplegara-nucleo-telefonica-alemania_1_6040192.html

²⁹ Kondratieff 1956; Schumpeter 2002.

³⁰ Bank for International Settlements (BIS), “Understanding Globalisation”, julio de 2017.

This unsurpassable tension between globalism and territorialism is rooted in the same double nature of what Marx called the “elemental form” of wealth in modern society: the commodity. This form of modern wealth has two social components: its quality of use, its utility, which Marx calls use value; and the second component, its quality of interchangeability, the way to access it, the exchange value. The modern world is, then, a showcase of millions of goods that carry some kind of social utility or “material content of wealth”, but they are only accessible, available for use, if one pays their exchange value.

Now, this quality of consumption of goods, their use value, refers us to the system of needs of a society. Today we have in shops objects that hundreds or thousands of years ago would surely not have any sense or use. The utility of things depends, then, on a social environment, on practical logical modes of organising social life, on a kind of appetites, expectations, and consumption patterns that a determined society has created in history. Things that are useful today will cease to be so tomorrow, and things that are useless today may become very useful in the future, depending on how society has been culturally structuring its consumption and its horizon of expectations.

This social determination of the world of needs is called the system of needs, and it is clear that it is a mainly territorial-based cultural and moral construction³¹, which takes into account a society’s labour capacities, the specific logical and instrumental ways of organising life in common, the accumulation of collective appetites generated, external influences, and the capacity to adapt its consumption expectations to its real capacity to satisfy them.

This adaptation of consumption expectations, which could be infinite, to the capacities to satisfy them (which are limited), is what delimits the system of needs in a given society and what furthermore structures the territorial social order, that is, the daily correspondence between the norm, the law, the property regime and the moral, logical and instrumental behaviour of individuals. And this is a task of cultural adherence and territorialized social cohesion that has fallen, falls and, necessarily, will continue to fall to the States.

The fact that people do not assault shops to get access to the merchandise of their desire, and they are punished if they do so; the fact that they learn skills to use and acquire knowledge to value certain things; the fact that they cultivate dispositions of intimate adherence to form in which the world is organised and how to develop successfully in it; the fact that they appreciate certain material characteristics of things over others; the fact that they prioritise certain uses over others, certain goods over others, the naturalised use of money itself as a means of exchange, etc., all of these things that set the wheels of the

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31 Marx 1981, p.208.

world of commodities in motion every day, depend on school and family education; they depend on the system of rules and ideas prevailing in communication systems; they depend on the threatening punishments and acknowledgements of legitimacy that are largely monopolised by the state, or at least organised and delimited by it.

In this way, the realization of the use value of the commodity in modern capitalist society is regulated, produced and validated in the national-state territorial space. It is as if the material content of wealth, in its objective quality of usefulness, compresses accumulated history and culture which makes it a useful object for those who observe it and want it.³² Hence Marx points out that the various aspects of the usefulness of things and, “consequently, of the multiple ways of using things, constitute a historical fact.”³³

Thus, when the person is confronted with the commodity, in order for the utility to emerge in it and to enable the act of interchangeability, of purchase and use, it has to be, previously, a structural tuning between the world of social perceptions of the person and the world of objective, socially produced qualities of things. Or, in Marx’s words, it must “be accredited as values of use before it can be realised as values”.³⁴ And this can only be achieved by the territorial cultural system of the state, or states, by means of the construction of the system of needs that depends on culture, social cohesion and the constant adaptation of personal needs to social possibilities. To the extent that this cognitive subsoil illuminates the social utility of the object that is in front of the person, the whole history of the thing: of the product of work as a commodity with an exchange value for its interchangeability, has just begun. The fact that the exchange value then dominates social history, including the permanent construction of the structural harmony between human perceptions of what is considered socially useful and the material quality of the merchandise, does not prevent this process of the social construction of the utility of things from having to be renewed every day in a territorialized way in people’s cognitive and sensitive schemes.

Then it is in the use value of the commodity that the first geographical dimension of capitalism is nested: the state-national space. Because this territorialized space is where social cohesion is built, where culture is built, where a correspondence is produced between people’s practical knowledge and the material utilities of things and, therefore, where the set of collective needs of society is shaped.

Capitalism in its beginnings has emerged in the context of cities, lordships, empires, colonies, ancient national forms, and agrarian

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32 About the implications of the concept of use-values in Marx’s theory, see: Echeverría 1998.

33 Marx 1981, p. 44.

34 Ibid., p. 105. m

communities, all of which were territorialized, with differentiated processes of state political cohesion, specific modes of managing common goods and particular regulations on the interchangeability of products. Of these multiple pre-existing state forms, due to its own internal dynamics, historical contingencies, and the growing influence of capitalist logic, the modern state form has been consolidated until today, and because of these three sources of origin, it is always in transformation. State form and capitalist economic form are two different but increasingly intertwined and interdependent historical processes. In the facts there is a formal, and then real, subsumption of aspects of the pre-existing state modes of territorial organization by the capitalist rationality. The forms of value studied by Marx in chapter one of *Capital* can also be applied to the understanding of the forms of colonization of capitalist logic, to the ways of structuring the contemporary modes of conformation and legitimization of state monopolies as a capitalist state. In this case we are dealing with an example of real subsumption. But this does not mean that the state is a direct and full product of capitalist rationality. There are decisive areas of modern state functioning, such as the need for common resources that unite society, that is to say the “community” dimension of the state, which have their own roots and rationalities; just as there are areas of modern society that have their own roots and logics which are not a mere unfolding of the capitalist logic of production. In this case we are only dealing with a merely formal subsumption without the possibility of going further.

The other component of this simple and fundamental object of modern society, the commodity, is the exchange value that refers us to the forms of interchangeability of things. What differentiates capitalism from other societies, where objects are also produced, is that the direct producer produces for someone “who is not the possessor”. For someone who is neither the direct producer of that commodity nor the owner of that commodity. And the “non-possessor”³⁵ who has to realise the utility of the produced object can be someone from the region, the country, the continent or the world itself.

This means that the whole planet is the space for the realisation of the interchangeability of goods or, if you prefer, the limit of interchangeability of the product of someone's work, is the whole world. The commodity establishes a type of social universalism that articulates people above kinships, countries, states and continents. My product, Marx notes, is a product for me only in so far as it is a product for someone else; it is therefore an individual that has been surpassed, a universal.³⁶ However, this is an abstract universalism because the link with the rest of

35 Ibid.

36 Marx p.208.

the inhabitants of the world who are capable of realising the “use value” of the object can only be realised through the “undifferentiated human labour” contained in the merchandise, the “exchange value”, which is an abstraction of the concrete works that produce concrete goods.

Since the amount of abstract labour, the exchange value, is the key to access to the commodity, interchangeability does not depend on kinship, nationality, language or cultural proximity; it depends only on possessing the equivalent of that amount of labour deposited in some other necessary material body (barter), or on general equivalence (money), which immediately enables the purchase and sale of goods. And since this is a bond based on a quantity of human labour in general, a universal and abstract quality of human activity regardless of the place of people, then the space of potential territorial realization of the commodity is again rounded off globally. In this sense, to the extent that the world is the space of realization of this kind of interchangeability based on a universal abstraction (human labour in general), then the territoriality of the exchange value is the planet itself or, if you prefer, globalization. Without forgetting, of course, that even in this dimension of the universal realization of the interchangeability of goods as bearers of a universal quality of “undifferentiated human labour,” as Marx points out in some extraordinary pages, it is a common quality that is an “abstract objectivity, a thing of the intellect”³⁷ and for whose “naturalized” use by all producers and buyers a long process of socialization has been required “by education, habit and custom”.³⁸ Socialization which, until nowadays, has been promoted, organized and regulated precisely by state forms.

Graph 2



37 Marx 1981, pp. 987, 988.

38 Ibid., p. 922.)

Summarizing, in the cell of modern society, the merchandise as a social process, the two territorial spaces of the constitution of modern society are contained. The commodity, as a value of use, preferably enables the national-state space as the space of constitution of needs, of culture, of cohesion and of the legitimization or specifically capitalist way of construction of the moral schemes, of the logical schemes, of the procedural and instrumental schemes of people. And, on the other hand, the commodity, as an exchange value, enables the space of interchangeability of the labour-value that it contains the space-world, the space-planet as the place of the final realization of the commodity.

The different ways of producing wealth have had a way of defining the geographical space of its realization. The commodity form, that is, the organizational nucleus of capitalism, is born, simultaneously, with the constitution of two spaces: the space of necessity – which is a cultural fact, is a logical and practical fact - and the space of interchangeability – which is, by definition, universal, planetary.

Capitalism is born by simultaneously crossing two spaces, two social geographies, two territorialities: the national-state geography and the planetary geography; the national geopolitical dimension of the commodity and the universal planetary geopolitical dimension of the commodity.

This explains why, throughout the history of capitalism, for more than 500 years, in its different cyclical and historical variants, whether under Dutch hegemony, then English hegemony, then American,³⁹ the development of the capitalist world has exchanged, in each systemic cycle, moments of predominance of protectionist policies centered on the internal market, tariff barriers, local labour regulations, etc., and moments of supremacy of economic liberalism, planetary opening of markets, labour deregulations, financialization of the economy, etc.

Protectionism prioritizes the protection of national industry, the regulation of financial flows, selective links with other national markets, import substitution and, in short, the capitalist densification of the national space. It is not a question of the formation of autarkic spaces, since world trade flows objectively articulate the various national activities; but this world market and this economy, which has been globalized for more than 200 years, tends to organize itself with the national-state space as its cell. In this first moment, the capitalist world presents itself as a flexible articulation of capitalist state-national spaces.

But, at the same time, the other constitutive space of modern capitalism is exchange value, and we have associated exchange value with universality. And this universality of exchange is free exchange.

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39 Arrigi 1999.

Rooted in the immanent logic of the commodity and of capitalism, this theoretical, economic, ideological, and philosophical tendency towards free exchange, or liberalism or neoliberalism, emerges; from its point of view, the concern is no longer the inner space, it is not the inner geography, it is not the inner horizon of society. Liberal or neo-liberal free trade logic will have to focus its concern, its policies and its reflections on a consideration of the world market, of global money flows, of planetary financial markets, of deregulations of all kinds. Therefore, in this view, state borders are a nuisance, national cultures are a barrier, and the aim is to create a single homogeneous space of universality of the commodity of capital.

It is not that the national-state dimension disappears under this logic. To date, there is still no space or institutionality capable of replacing that of the Nation-State in the construction of logical and moral adherence to the mercantile form of production and society. But, in addition, economic liberalism in fact functions as the global imposition of economic logic, of the need for new markets for the production and finances of the hegemonic nation-state worldwide. And the continuity and success of this hegemonic capitalist state is at stake in this collapse of borders. But what differentiates it from the planetary territoriality under economic liberalism is that this planetary space of irradiation of the hegemonic power pre-exists and regulates the presence and density of national spaces.

In protectionism the world capitalist space is presented as the articulated sum of state-national spaces. In liberalism, the planetary space is presented as previous and independent of the national-state spaces, whose opaque existence is supported as necessary to discipline, culturally and coercively, the popular classes.

Both historical moments require the national state space and the planetary space to unfold within them the development of capitalist modernity. But what differentiates them is the predominance of one of the spaces in the constitution of the other. The two will always be interacting, the national and the global. But under protectionism, it is not only the national-state space that stands out, but the planetary space is constituted from the national-state spaces. At the moment of free trade, the planetary space is the one that predominates and is also the one that shapes the national-state space as a contingent place of social cohesion and adherence.

Capitalism, therefore, is born with an insuperable tension from its very foundation. As long as there is capitalism, there will be this tension between the dimension of the national-state space and the dimension of the planetary space. In some moments, one of those spaces, the national space will be the predominant one; in other moments, the planetary space will be the predominant one. But in neither case

does one make the other disappear. Although they are presented as antagonistic, in reality they need each other. That is why in all historical moments different modes of coexistence and articulation of national and planetary social struggles have always existed and will continue to exist. With the characteristic that are the struggles of national-state character where at the end the possibility of transformation of the social nature of the state is settled, because the main activities of socialization of the people are deposited in it.

It can therefore be said that, in general terms, the historical narrative of the capitalist economy has two main aspects; protectionism (with multiple variants) and liberalism (with multiple variants). The moments in which protectionism predominates (1930, after the 1929 stock market crisis), until the 1970s, are times of expansion of national markets, expansion of social rights which in the case of the United States and Europe gave rise to the “Welfare State” that lasted until the 1980s; and in the case of Latin America to the policies of import substitution. But even in the most intense moments of protectionism, a global dimension of other economic flows will also be present, such as technological and financial circuits and an international division of labour (countries that produce the primary), countries that process the primary), countries that make intermediate products and countries that generate high technology.

The same applies to the logic of free trade in the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, and from 1980 until now. Although in the liberal logic there is a predominance of the planetary space as a scenario for the circulation of financial capital, and as a space for the circulation of transnational industries, there is a necessary and essential function of the state-national space to generate consensus, moral tolerance or, if necessary, discipline in the face of these decisions.

However, each of these two internal forces of the form of capitalist social wealth, in their moment of cyclical predominance, institute self-centered ideological narratives that in the end turn out to be failed. The protectionist reading of space conceives the world as a sum of sovereign state-national spaces, one alongside the other, and therefore the capitalist world, will be the negotiated articulation of the relations of these subjects called nation-states. This is a failed utopia, because in reality not even in the twentieth century was there a full state sovereignty (it is enough to see the reduced sovereignty of Germany, Japan, Latin America, or Africa); but furthermore, because of the very nature of the commodity whose space of interchangeability is planetary, there is a set of economic relations that have been built independently from the states, above the states, as the pattern of worldwide interchangeability; silver in the 17th and 18th centuries; the pound in the 19th century, gold and the dollar in the 20th century; or the financial market system, or the division of labour and the interlinking of production chains, etc.

The neo-liberal utopia, for its part, imagined the world as a homogeneous global space where there were no longer any barriers or cultural strongholds that differentiated countries and where everyone would be a consumer or a producer, or a businessman or an entrepreneur, without any difference. But this utopia also failed because, as the general response to the pandemic showed, modern society has no other way of constructing a symbolic world with the capacity for lasting cultural and political direction than through territorial adherence to states.

This is what can be called the end of the neoliberal political utopia. It is not that economic globalization will disappear. Trade flows and financial markets will have to be maintained, slowed down, perhaps cut back, and combined with modes of territorial protectionism in a type of hybrid economy typical of the transition stages; but the planetary space as a stage for the realization of money will have to continue. However, what already appears as a decrepit, exhausted ideology is the ideology of neo-liberal globalization as the final destiny of humanity.

What remains is a general uncertainty, a misdirection, a healthy and liberating loss of the unique sense of history. Liberating because the ideology of globalization imposed social impotence, resignation in the face of “ineluctable destiny”. Today the absence of destiny has assumed the status of a popular prejudice: therefore, what will happen will depend on what society itself can do, on what its desperation or reborn hopes can allow.

In this scenario of the porosity of old certainties and of the hybridization of the organizational proposals for the state, the economy and society, a sociological displacement of the spatial axis of political positions is taking place, which is causing the right wing to take the place of the left on some issues. In response to all this, the left has to expand and radicalize the spatial axis of the position of the discourses by creating a new “center” and a new “left” more on the left, capable of displacing society and the state towards forms of greater democratization of social wealth. As always, democracy and property are the two pillars on which every equality program is based.

Democratization of decisions on all areas of life in common, starting with decisions concerning rights, public wealth that belongs to everyone, and new goods that are to be considered the property of everybody, culminating in the democratization of the gigantic wealth that is owned by only a few and that has to serve to cover the enormous expenses that the state will have to make for decades to guarantee the well-being of the population. And the left that wishes to go beyond the state cannot but take this path of greater social democratization. Even in a long-term perspective, the struggle to overcome the state form can only be a democratization of the handling of the common bonds that a society has, and desires to have; but certainly now without monopolies of that management.

It is clear that this depends on two practical processes: horizons for the future capable of unifying the practical hopes of people, and collective strength mobilized, territorially and thematically, with the effect of reorganizing life in common around some new moral, instrumental, logical, and procedural principles. It is not a question of inventing realities, but of reinforcing, making visible and intensifying forms of collective action, mobilizing beliefs and expectations already present in the plebeian interstices of today's society. Encouraging the imagination and the creation of new futures to go beyond the individual, family or corporate, in order to assume the ethical dimension of embracing life in common with the rest of society, firstly national-territorial and then global, is the great task of the present.

In short, the logical and practical order of societies and state forms are in tactical suspension; therefore, in dispute. Not assuming these struggles with passion is a historical disregard that can lead, by force of inertia, to a degrading and vengeful revival of the old neo-liberal social-state order.

Translated by Ramiro Parodi and Natalia Romé

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XV Theses on the Ecological Crisis and the Pandemia

Michael Löwy

Abstract: The ecological crisis - of which the Covid 19 pandemia is one of the symptoms - is already the most important social and political question of the 21st century, and will become even more so in the coming months and years. The future of the planet, and thus of humanity, will be decided in the coming decades. There is no solution to the ecological crisis within the framework of capitalism, a system entirely devoted to productivism, consumerism, the ferocious struggle for 'market shares', to capital accumulation and maximizing profits. Its intrinsically perverse logic inevitably leads to the break down of the ecological equilibrium and the destruction of the ecosystems.

KEYWORDS : Ecological crisis, capitalism, ecosocialism

I. The COVID-19 pandemia is, according to the best specialists, a result of the invasion of the natural environment by modern agriculture, and the marketing of savage animal species. It is one of the multiple aspects of the ecological crisis, on a world scale. Globalisation, with the massive transport of individuals and commodities around the planet, produced the rapid expansion of the virus.

II. *The ecological crisis is already the most important social and political question of the 21st century, and will become even more so in the coming months and years.* The future of the planet, and thus of humanity, will be decided in the coming decades. Calculations by certain scientists as to scenarios for the year 2100 aren't very useful for two reasons: 1) scientific: considering all the feedback effects impossible to calculate, it is very risky to make projections over a century; 2) political: at the end of the century, all of us, our children and grandchildren will be gone, so who cares?

III. As the IPCC explains, if the average temperature exceeds the pre-industrial periods by 1.5°, there is a risk of setting off an irreversible climate change process 1. The ecological crisis involves several facets, with hazardous consequences, but the climate question is doubtless the most dramatic threat. What would the consequences of this be? Just a few examples: the multiplication of megafires such as in Australia; the disappearance of rivers and the desertification of land areas, melting and dislocation of polar ice and raising the sea level, which could reach dozens of meters. Yet, at two meters vast regions of Bangladesh, India, and Thailand, as well as the major cities of human civilisation – Hong Kong, Calcutta, Venice, Amsterdam, Shanghai, London, New York, Rio – will have disappeared beneath the sea. How high can the temperature go? At what temperature will human life on this planet be threatened? No one has an answer to these questions.

IV. These are risks of a catastrophe unprecedented in human history. One would have to go back to the Pliocene, some millions of years ago, to find climate conditions similar to what could become reality in the future, due to climate change. Most geologists consider that we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, when conditions on the planet have been modified by human action? What action? Climate change began with the 18th Century Industrial Revolution, but it is after 1945, with neoliberal globalisation, that it took a qualitative leap. In other words, modern capitalist industrial civilisation is responsible for the accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere, thus of global heating.

V. The capitalist system's responsibility in the imminent catastrophe is widely recognised. Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, without uttering the word 'capitalism' spoke out against a structurally perverse system of commercial and property relations based exclusively on the 'principle of profit maximization' as responsible both for social injustice and destruction of our Common House, Nature. A slogan universally chanted the world over in ecological demonstrations is 'Change the System, not the Climate!' The attitude shown by the main representatives of this system, advocates of *business as usual* – billionaires, bankers, 'experts', oligarchs, politicians – can be summed up by the phrase attributed to Louis XV: 'After me, the deluge'.

VI. The systemic nature of the problem is cruelly illustrated by governments' behaviour. All, (with very rare exceptions) acting in the service of capital accumulation, multinationals, the fossil oligarchy, general commodification and free trade. Some of them – Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Scott Morrison (Australia) – are openly ecocidal and climate deniers. The other, 'reasonable' ones, set the tone at the annual COP (Conference of the Parties or Circuses Organised Periodically?) meetings, which feature vague 'green' rhetoric and total inertia. The most successful was COP 21, in Paris, which concluded with solemn promises from all governments taking part to reduce emissions – not kept, except by a few Pacific islands. Scientists calculate that even if they had been kept, the temperature would still rise up to 3.3° higher...

VII. 'Green capitalism', 'carbon markets', 'compensation mechanisms, and other manipulations of the so-called 'sustainable market economy' have proven perfectly useless, while 'greening' goes on and on, emissions are skyrocketing and catastrophe gets closer and closer. There is no solution to the ecological crisis within the framework of capitalism, a system entirely devoted to productivism, consumerism, the ferocious struggle for 'market shares', to capital accumulation and maximizing profits. Its intrinsically perverse logic inevitably leads to the break down of the ecological equilibrium and the destruction of the ecosystems.

VIII. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant decrease in production and transport of commodities. This reduced the carbon emissions, but only on a very limited scale. As soon as the epidemic is under control – thanks to the discovery of a vaccine – there will be an immediate return to "business as usual". There should be no illusion that after the COVID-19 crisis "everything will be changed" and there will be no return to the previous situation.

IX. The only effective alternatives, capable of avoiding catastrophe, are radical alternatives. 'Radical' means attacking the root of the evil. If the capitalist system is at the root, we need anti-system alternatives, i.e., anti-capitalist ones, such as eco-socialism, an ecological socialism up to the challenges of the 21st century. Other radical alternatives such as eco-feminism, social ecology (Murray Bookchin), André Gorz's political ecology, or degrowth have much in common with eco-socialism: relations of reciprocal influence have developed in recent years.

X. What is socialism? For many Marxists, it is transformation of the relationships of production – by the collective appropriation of the means of production – to allow the free development of productive forces. Eco-socialism lays claim to Marx, but explicitly breaks with this approach and with the productivist and anti-ecological model of the so-called "really existing socialism" of Stalinist inspiration. Of course, collective ownership is indispensable, but the productive forces themselves must also be transformed: a) by changing their energy sources (renewables instead of fossil fuels); b) by reducing global energy consumption; c) by reducing production of goods ('degrowth'), and by eliminating useless activities (advertising) and harmful ones (pesticides, weapons of war, etc.); d) by putting a stop to planned obsolescence. Eco-socialism also involves transformation, after a process of democratic discussion, of consumption models, transport forms, urbanism and 'ways of life.' In short, it is much more than a change of property forms: it is a *civilisational change*, based on values of solidarity, democracy, equal liberty, and respect for nature. Eco-socialist civilisation breaks with productivism and consumerism, in favour of shorter working time, thus more free time devoted to social, political, recreational, artistic, erotic, and other activities. Marx referred to this goal by the term 'realm of freedom'.

XI. To achieve the transition towards eco-socialism, democratic planning is required, guided by two criteria: meeting actual needs, and respect for the ecological balance of the planet. The people themselves – once the onslaught of advertising and the consumption obsession created by the capitalist market are eliminated – will decide, democratically, what their real needs are. Eco-socialism is a wager on the democratic rationality of the popular classes.

XII. This requires a real social revolution. To carry out the ecosocialist project, partial reforms will not suffice. How can such a revolution be defined? We could refer to a note by Walter Benjamin, on the margins of his theses *On the concept of history* (1940): ‘Marx said that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But things might work out otherwise. It is possible that revolutions are the act by which humans travelling in the train pull the emergency brakes’. Translation in 21st century terms: we are all passengers on a suicidal train, which is named Modern Industrial Capitalist Civilisation. This train is running towards a catastrophic abyss: climate change. Revolutionary action aims to halt it – before it is too late.

XIII. Eco-socialism is at once a project for the future and a strategy for the struggle here and now. There is no question of waiting for ‘the conditions to be ripe’. It is necessary to provoke convergence between social and ecological struggles and fight the most destructive initiatives by powers in the service of capital. This is what Naomi Klein called *Blockadia*. Within mobilisations of this type, an anti-capitalist consciousness and interest in eco-socialism can emerge during struggles. Proposals such as the Green New Deal are part of this struggle, in their radical forms, which require effectively renouncing fossil energies – but not in those limited to recycling ‘green capitalism’.

XIV. Who is the subject in this struggle? The workerist/industrialist dogmatism of the previous century is no longer current. The forces now at the forefront of the confrontation are youth, women, Indigenous people, and peasants. Women are very present in the formidable youth uprising launched by Greta Thunberg’s call – one of the great sources of hope for the future. As the eco-feminists explain to us, this massive women’s participation in the mobilisations comes from the fact that they are the first victims of the system’s damage to the environment. Unions are beginning here and there to also get involved. This is important, because, *in the final analysis, we can’t overcome the system without the active participation of urban and rural workers, who make up the majority of the population*. The first condition, in each movement, is associating ecological goals (closing coal mines or oil wells, or coal-fired power stations, etc.) with guaranteed employment for the workers involved.

XV. Do we have any chance of winning this battle, before it is too late? Unlike the so-called ‘collapsologists’ who clamorously proclaim that catastrophe is inevitable and that any resistance is futile, we think the future is open. There is no guarantee that this future will be eco-socialist: this is the object of a wager in the Pascalian sense, in which we commit all our forces, in a ‘labour for uncertainty’. But as Bertolt Brecht said, with grand and simple wisdom: “Those who fight may lose. Those who don’t fight have already lost.”

Gas and Blas(t)

Artemy Magun & Michael Marder

Abstract: This is an article on the critical philosophy of nature. It takes a critical-dialectical approach to primary natural phenomena, such as gases and particles (viruses, atoms). These phenomena make up the framework of the ongoing crisis in our relationship to nature, surrounded as we are by the wrong atmospheric gases and organic particles. The question, for us, is not why those are wrong, but what gases and particles are in general. In fact, both of these phenomena are constituted through a latent negative effort of the subject, both epistemic and practical. It turns out that this effort is the same in our construction of nature and of our socio-economic world; therefore, the article speaks of “capitalism” as a general attitude of infinite fragmentation, used to understand nature, society and, at their point of encounter, technology. We call this effort *blas*, using a neologism by Joan van Helmont. Negativity allows humans to create a second, presumably safe environment for themselves and to isolate matter in easily cognizable chunks. However, the same negativity turns back on us since it cannot be complete: in the process of being rarefied and neutralized, matter resurfaces, dialectically, in a spiritual form, gases and viruses being both *material spirits* and *demonic objects*.

Keywords: Philosophy of nature, gas, dialectics, negativity, capitalism, van Helmont.

1. Of Gases, Ghosts, and Viruses

Two recent encounters with nature have affected humanity, body and soul. First, there is a relatively rapid transformation of climates through the emission of the carbon dioxide (CO₂), triggering changes in our immediate environment with its habitual temperature and comfort. Second, there is the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2019) pandemic, which emerged as an apparent sign of globalized humanity’s major vulnerability to viruses – particles too small to be successfully eradicated with the help of contemporary drugs. These interventions of inhuman nature seem to stand apart, and Slavoj Žižek has even observed that there is an implicit contradiction between the gases we produce ourselves and a foreign virus that has traveled into our bodies from wild animals.¹

However, if we explore the situation phenomenologically and conceptually, we see a dialectical unity of the two crises and of the ways they are framed.

Both encounters are still ongoing; their uncertain duration and lack of clearly marked spatial boundaries are only fitting, given the

1 “[W]hen nature is attacking us with viruses, it is in a way sending our own message back to us. The message is: what you did to me, I am now doing to you” (Žižek 2020a). This statement also appears in Žižek 2020b, p. 85, but see a possible contradiction at p. 95, where the author warns against anthropomorphism: “I find problematic the use of the term “war” for our struggle against the virus: the virus is not an enemy with plans and strategies to destroy us, it is just a stupid self-replicating mechanism.”

medium, wherein they take place. In both of them, we deal with an *invisible* and *suprasensible* threat, perfectly matching an advanced state of our deterritorialization, the abstraction of existence itself, and, indeed, our ungluing from the earth, be it the earth of agriculture, the substratum of life, or, at the extreme, the planet as a whole. Are the invisibility and the suprasensible character of the twin threats not the omens of metaphysics, which lingers with, around, and in us long past its due date in shapes that are, by now, barely recognizable? And are they not, by the same token, the mementos of industrial and postindustrial capitalism that has never been anything other than a reinvented, revamped form of metaphysics?²

“All that is solid melts into air”³ but not without dangerously transforming the element, into which it has melted. We need not take this statement metaphorically, the way Marx and Engels intended when they referred to the indifference of capitalist value to use-values as much as to established customs, ways of life, entire worlds. Mass incineration of fossil fuels in the course of the Industrial Revolution and well after it burned and actually threw parts of the earth (the petrified, liquified, or gaseous remains of past life that the earth contained, that it became, and that became it) into the air. Smog and global warming are at once the *material* and the *spiritual* legacies of metaphysics that, masquerading as economic activity, elevated the earth and suffused with its bits entire regions where they do not belong. A “bad” gas, like carbon dioxide, is a paradoxical but not infrequent case of *material spirit*, the spirit of matter itself, with which we are also familiar in the phenomenon of fermentation.

The dialectical unity of the two threats now appears in a new light: carbon dioxide is a gas, and coronaviruses also come to us through the air, pulverized as though in the mode of a gas. We learn of their identity through scientific tools and frame it within our imaginary, which stems from Greek atomists. We identify the disease with the particulate pathogen that provokes it and the air with its atomic composition. The very word *gas* probably comes from *chaos*,⁴ referring both to the ancient mythical savagery of the invisible void and to the atomistic understanding of gas, which “really” is the disorderly movement of dispersed particles (atoms). Gas is material being at its most abstract, spreading through the air, often inaccessible to the senses – “a *negative* universality” with “insidious and consuming power over what is individual and organic.”⁵ In global warming and airborne viruses we are faced, precisely, with such a “*negative* universality” of a gaseous substance that loosely unites particles and a void, matter and its abstraction.

2 For more on this theme, see Marder 2020.

3 Marx and Engels 1976, p. 487.

4 The word was invented in the early 17th century by Joan van Helmont (see more below).

5 Hegel 2004, p. 108.

Furthermore, in both cases we deal with the hyperbolic polarity of scale, if of inverse proportions. Viruses are not only invisible; they are the smallest living beings, themselves situated at the threshold of life and death. And then we, the Gullivers, are afraid of these Lilliputian soldiers, the viruses, which are the scarier the less tangible they are. The same happens, symmetrically, with climate change and the so-called Anthropocene: we, the minuscule creatures, are causing troubles on a planetary scale, becoming the viruses of Earth. The diffusion of by-products from our economic life-activity and of the viruses themselves in the air – in which they circulate, which they suffuse and transform – turns us and them into agents of negative universality, wielding the “insidious and consuming,” ghostly and gaseous, power that goes along with such universality.

Gas is a neologism, the proper name of a *spirit*. Henceforth, to spiritualize is to gasify and to gasify is to spiritualize, including the guest and the host, as well, in anonymous hosting by the medium of negative universality.⁶ The author of this name, the sixteenth-century Dutch alchemist Joan Baptista van Helmont (who, incidentally, is a key character in a recent cartoon *Hotel Transylvania* where he unsuccessfully fights monsters) simultaneously produced another, parallel one, *blas* (from “blow”), for the moving impulse of bodies. “*Gas et Blas nova quidem sunt nomina, de me introducta, eo quod illorum cognitio veteribus fuerit ignota*”.⁷ What is this *blas* of things, if not the consequence of an explosion, a *blast* (a word of the same root), which disperses matter all around and which, like Marx’s bourgeoisie, “makes everything solid melt into the air”?

To van Helmont, matter consisted not of inert atoms but of spiritual *archeia*,⁸ and gases particles were clear instances of these. While living in a presumably secure and protected environment – of the atmosphere, of light, of language, of houses –, humans are exposed to the demonology of the small and the wild.

Some claimed that van Helmont derived *gas* not from chaos, but from *Geist*, or, in Dutch, *geest*.⁹ This is probably not entirely true, but he does call gas a spirit, and the word *gas* – a “new word,” so that the cross-contamination of two sounds in a *portmanteau* word is likely. Van Helmont

6 On the interrelation of guest, host, and ghost, see Derrida 1994.

7 Partington 1936, p. 372.

8 “The kernel of every seed is the archeus, the active principle of every individual material object. It can only be mentioned in passing that van Helmont identified the archeus with ‘gas’ and thus believed to have made it empirically accessible.” Heinecke 1995, p. 66.

9 See, for instance, Draper 1861, p. 178, or Knott 1905. See also the OED entry for “gas.” The “geest” theory is now considered dated, but is still listed in the Wikipedia entry on gas.

also calls his gas a *gas sylvester*,¹⁰ which means, a savage gas, sending us back to the notion of the woods, the very epitome of the wild, dangerous, and, at the same time, enveloping, nature.¹¹ Gas is a forest spirit, a ghost of the densest material existence it, in some way, commemorates.

Statically speaking, gases are the *embodied void*, while, dynamically speaking, they are an ongoing event and the force of *dissolution*. We need this force to make space for ourselves inside matter, to make matter roomy and capacious for our existence at the zero point of a world, to induce comfortable spontaneity that works as a ground for the figures produced by our creativity. And, at the same time, gases are the entropic waste of our creative activity, the consequences of the ongoing destruction and pulverization of matter in a search for its stable units. The very force and event that open the world close it, foreclose existence in the too-much of space, an aperture that is too wide and that, as such, surpasses all boundaries with the negative universality of light and emptiness. The lethal play of de-vastation, at once negating and affirming vastness, commences.

Gaseous units, too – when we manage to identify them – appear as though they were only half-real. Descartes, not as poetically minded as van Helmont, called them *materia subtilis*, subtle matter, sub-matter. The small and subtle seems to be only a quantitative determination of atoms and viruses, but in fact, given that we keep splitting the atom and that the virus itself is only a fragment of a cell, there is reason to believe that they are ways, through which we can empirically speak of a nothing and can touch the void itself.

Viruses are pernicious demons, but with atoms, our first association is the atomic bomb: the destructive, demonic machine, which is based on the fact that an atom is not an *a-tomon*, that it is further divisible into particles or fragments, and that this dispersion annihilates everything around it. The bomb is atomic, because an atom is not really an ultimate kernel of being, but a half-nothing; it hypostatizes emergence-into-being, but an immediate and direct hypostasis of such emergence can only be a potentially destructive negativity that, at the extreme, vaporizes everything in the vicinity, turning all into gas. An atom is, itself, a small bomb, a secret terrorist device that explodes all by itself whenever it is tracked down. Isn't it the same with the viruses that show how a cell is not a *kutos*, that it is not a closed or a self-enclosed vessel, and that the DNA code it contains may be recoded, changing the vessel as much as its contents? Just as, in physics, atoms are not the ultimate kernels of being, so in biology, cells are not the ultimate building block of a living body. Viruses that, by definition, “contain either RNA or DNA genome

10 Partington 1936, p. 369.

11 For a philosophical theory of the woods, consult Bibikhin 2020.

surrounded by a protective, virus-coded protein coat”¹² disclose the truth of cells.

The philosophical point of atomic and viral fragmentation¹³ is that splitting is the underside of an identity, through which this identity is constituted and through which it is, with equal success, undone, since the negative moment of constitution does not pass, but lingers on as a shadowy double of the one (including at atomic and subatomic, cellular and organelle, levels) – a ghost, a spirit, or a gas. With regard to an identity, fragmentation follows the non-linear and non-circular temporality of *Kairos*. Viruses fashion out of replication or doubling their very life-activity (if a *life*-activity it is), tirelessly replayed on an ever-expanding scale. And the fragmentariness of their physical makeup matches the partiality of the process, as far as identity-formation is concerned. Not only do they constantly mutate, borrowing bits of DNA code from the hosts they pass through, but they also bypass the phase of consolidation, not reuniting with themselves, not circling back to themselves across the gap of splitting and divergence. That is why, on a linear timescale, which is not entirely suitable to them, the fragmentation of atoms and viruses may seem infinite.

Hegel¹⁴ and, especially, Engels¹⁵ interpreted the Leibnizean calculus of the infinitely small as a way to understand the negative itself and turn it into positivity. The relative smallness, along with the very hyperbolic contrast between the very big and the very small, allude to an *absolute* negativity and *incorporeal* spirituality, which, in addition to abandoning the category of quantity, switches temporal registers from linear-chronological to punctual-kairotic. The animalculi are small devils, “diaboli,” the barely positive bearers of the negative spirit of dissolution. Hegel, in his *Logic*, makes a remark on what he calls “porosity”, that is, the penetrability of bodies, seen as containing holes. He claims that this quantitative structural understanding hides a more fundamental truth, that of a simultaneous co-presence of several matters, or elements, in a body: the very distinction between them was artificial to start with.¹⁶ In our case, this is true with a twist: a virus is, of course, foreign to a human body, but in penetrating it, it attacks its “soul,” the identity coded into the DNA, by forcing cells to become virus-generating machines. Producing multiple copies of itself and changing the script of its host's cells, it “wants” the entire body to become a virus of sorts, while

12 Gelderblom 1996, p. 529.

13 On the theory of infinite fragmentation in semiotics, see the original philological work by Thomas Schestag (2015), pp. 11-95.

14 Hegel 2010, pp. 218, 271 (Book 1, Section II; Chapters 2-3).

15 Engels 1947, pp. 84-85.

16 Hegel 2010, pp. 434-436 (Book 2, Section II, Chapter 1, Remark).

remaining a human being. In fact, viruses tend to attenuate their lethal force over time, so as to parasitize on their hosts for longer periods and not to debilitate them in a way that would prevent them from passing the pathogen on to others.

This is where some of the proponents of contemporary ecological thought fail to account for the negative, destructive side of symbiosis, where the withness (*sym*) of various kinds of life (*bios*) signifies the tying *and* the dissolution of a bond. At the most basic level, this conjunction of the bond's ligature and dissolution is the work of spirit; it is spirit at work, not least as a ghost or a gas. Therefore, the praise of humanity's "companion species," such as cuddly puppies and kittens,¹⁷ or of the synergies of other-than-humans, such as the bacteria dwelling in our guts,¹⁸ misses the forest for the trees – and not just because it valorizes positive affective attachments or the benefits we reap from constructing and sharing our lives together with members of other species. A more significant aspect they overlook is the cut, repulsion, disjointedness, maladjustment, or harm (in a word, negativity) that makes spiritual and symbiotic bonds possible. Viruses are, in this respect, not an aberration from cross-species cohabitation; they are the case-in-point, in which the negative element of symbiosis is simply more pronounced. But so is, also, the ghostly, gaseous, and, for all intents and purposes, spiritual nature of the bond they forge with us, as well as with other animals and even plants.

2. Capitalism and Gas

As we've already mentioned in a literal take on Marx and Engels, capitalism makes everything solid melt into the air, considerably polluting, solidifying this air as a result. There are two stories unfolding here. First, there is an idealist and spiritualist drive. Capitalism, as Lukacs has shown,¹⁹ aims to create an ideal, formal, legalistic and instrumentally rational social world with quantitative *value* for the sole standard and measure. But, dialectically, this ideality can only be achieved through an ongoing destruction of the material remnants of other categories that do not conform to the quantitative yardstick. To single out and hunt down an empirically given object, constant negative effort is needed, which does not end even in atoms. The newly found invisible micro-objects become proxies for what had previously been thought of as objective idealities. Modern technology exhibits tendencies towards minituarization and towards the use of airwaves, rather than material carriers. In both cases, the ultimate horizon is an idealistic

17 See Haraway 2008.

18 See Morton 2019.

19 Consult Lukacs 1971.

victory over matter, as well as an intrusion into the demonic world of invisible micro-objects, now humiliated and used as couriers.

The obverse of this process is, however, the *exploitation* of the positive forces of material objects, destroyed by incineration. Their heat is supplanted with the heat of idealization, which burns away the compounds it does not ontologically trust. What is aimed at, demonically, in exploiting both human labor and atoms, is the immaterial energy of creation, supposedly located at the threshold of nothing. But, materially, what is gained in destruction is, rather, the force of development and completion (the other side of energy) that had been spent for ages in forming complex chemical links. Labor is another matter, because, though it does build and develop, it is constantly denied its fruit, like the ancient Danaides, and is, thus, made into a quantifiable resource.

When Adam Smith gives one of the first accounts of what will have been called "capitalism," he pays special attention to money. Money, he writes, is a perfect matter for exchange, because it is infinitely *divisible*:

Metals can likewise, without any loss, be divided into any number of parts, as by fusion those parts can easily be re-united again; a quality, which no other equally durable commodities possess, and which more than any other quality renders them fit to be the instruments of commerce and circulation. The man who wanted to buy salt, for example, and had nothing but cattle to give in exchange for it, must have been obliged to buy salt to the value of a whole ox, or a whole sheep at a time.²⁰

It follows, implicitly, that exchange mediated by money allowed for the fragmentation of property and for the destruction of qualitatively complete objects, now gathered into a quantitatively defined homogeneous entity. Long before Marx, Smith alludes to a material *negative* force, acting as the engine of bourgeois economy.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*²¹, searches for an objective material correlate to the spiritualizing element of *Nothing*, which he had previously identified with consciousness (but, then, where would this ephemeral and phantasmatic milieu obtain any force to exist?). He finds it in the "rarity," which in English is rendered as "scarcity," and he literally means a lack of resources. It is, for Sartre, the *cogito* principle of capitalism. And yet, the French word also sends us back to anything *rarefied*. For example, a gas. There needs to be dispersion in matter, so that a consciousness and an agency could emerge, and, pace Sartre, this dispersion does not just happen on its own.

20 Smith 1976, pp. 38-39.

21 Sartre 2014, pp. 122-152.

Gases and viruses, in their turn, are *the agents of rarefaction*, with their material-spiritual agency prefiguring that of consciousness, which they continue to disturb and haunt after it has cropped up.

Contemporary capitalism is hard to describe only as scarcity; it is also characterized by the oversaturation of society with consumer goods (and “bads”). It is, nonetheless, crucial for these goods and bads, represented in commercials, to be omnipresent in the background mode, hovering, smoke-like, around a subject in whom they create an artificial longing. The psychic environment they stimulate corresponds to the phenomenological hypothesis, drawn by Husserl, that a massive and nebulous halo overhangs and surrounds the sphere of attention, nourished in its singularizing dynamism by its vague milieu. Under capitalism, the focused regard of consciousness—the focus that is consciousness understood in terms of intentionality, directing itself toward and zooming in on something in particular, a *this*—is unfocused and dispersed. Instead of shining the flashlight of consciousness onto the dynamic sphere of attention, we live directly in the halo of experience, which does not lend itself to being experienced, and miss out on what is surrounded by it. The background mode of mental life prevails over the singularity of what is (or what may be) foregrounded, if only for a fleeting instant. That said, capitalism does actually realize its utopia of turning figure into ground: the reality behind it is that of commodity fetishism with its obsessive attention to something between background and figure, the Lacanian marginal *objet petit a*. The too-little of rarefaction coincides with the too-much of hyperstimulation by the shreds of things and fragments of thoughts that comprise the atmospheric conditions of capitalism.

The rarefaction of the world goes hand in hand with the gasification of consciousness, its dispersal into permanent distraction that does not lend itself to temporary gathering in the finite movement of attention. It turns out that the underside of the idealization of consciousness, unmoored from a foregrounded *this*, is its diffusion into the unconscious or the semi-conscious. Our senses are, more and more, modeled on an abstraction, their subtler discernments voided by the massive stimuli that assault them on every register, from sight to hearing, from smell to taste. (Is it by chance that some of the common symptoms of COVID-19 include anosmia and dysgeusia, an assault on the senses also provoked by very large doses of radiation?)

Benjamin famously associated communism and contemporary art with “reception in a state of distraction,” akin to the attention paid to an architectural work of art.²² This utopia of non-thematic experience is, for Benjamin, a dialectical response to the “aura,” which is also an enveloping milieu, but a heavy and a stuffy one. Instead of the greenhouse

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22 Benjamin 2019, p. 193.

of an aura, humanity needs the “open air of history.”²³ Today, in place of Benjamin’s communist distraction, we get a capitalist distraction, which synthesizes aura and architecture, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, in a state of anonymous and impersonal hyperattention (first and foremost, by capital as an “automatic subject,” to recall Marx’s words²⁴) to nothing other than value and its self-augmentation. The dialectic comes to a standstill much earlier than Benjamin thinks it does, well before the formation of an image. It now gets stuck at what corresponds to the earliest stages in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, that is, the abstractions of sense-certainty, the apparent wealth of empirical sense data rendered *actually* identical to the poverty of a gasified consciousness.

In political practices, diffuse and nearly indifferent targeting has replaced the art of precise aiming that, until the twentieth century, defined the exercise of military skills. Sloterdijk makes this point with respect to the first chlorine gas attacks by the German troops in World War I: “The 20th century will be remembered as the age whose essential thought consisted in targeting no longer the body, but the enemy’s environment.”²⁵ Neoliberalism, too, does not directly kill its victims; rather, it denies the material conditions necessary for them to go on living, such as food, drinkable water, shelter... (In this sense, wasn’t Creon the prototypical and hardly surpassed neoliberal in his approach to Antigone, whom he confined in a cave, targeting not her, but her environment?) While the medium became the message, the background passed into the foreground: gas is no longer a mere means, but also the end of political activity.

3. The Greenhouse Effect

A little like Antigone herself, we wouldn’t be able to survive without the atmosphere of our planet, as much as of our social and psychic lives. If we look at this fact phenomenologically, we start appreciating the structure of the “figure-ground” relation and what it means for a being to be not a thing but a milieu, a sphere. To move something to the background of your attention used to require a negative effort, when living in and with the focused regard of consciousness, strictly equivalent to a direct targeting of the enemy, was still possible. Lacan, speaking of such acts in the aesthetic context, compares them to a “castration” of the gaze by a painting. The gaze, he says, is “laid down” into the picture, to prevent the anxiety of being seen, to liberate the “eye” from the gaze, the non-thematic *seeing* from the thematic *looking*.²⁶ Now, the cumulative

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23 See Benjamin 2003, p. 395, where he advocates a dialectical “leap in the open air of history” as opposed to a closed “arena.”

24 Marx 1992, p. 255.

25 Sloterdijk 2009, p. 14.

26 Lacan 1981, pp. 101-102, *passim*.

outcomes of past negative efforts at the backgrounding of attention give us the illusion of immediacy – of a natural cause, rather than the effects, of psychic life in a certain politico-economic setting. Again, the castration of the gaze implies a castration of the world as the world of things and, above all, of images (of things).

In parallel to how direct targeting is supplanted by undercutting an enemy's environment (an undercutting that cannot help but also harm one's own), poison gives way to toxicity. Besides being intended for an adversary it was meant to kill or at least to incapacitate, a poison could offer beneficial, curative properties if taken in the right amount in its capacity as a *pharmakon*. Toxicity, however, is an indifferent and diffuse threat that may backfire on those who unleash it, lest they be careful to prepare protective gear in advance. In a war setting, this preparation is a part of the strategy; in our agricultural and energy-production practices, we slowly kill ourselves by releasing toxins into the earth, underground water sources and plants, or by dumping massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the planet's atmosphere.

Toxicity is, of course, also an effect of porosity. Gases, like viruses, are toxic because they refuse to be self-contained things and, instead, penetrate human bodies under the guise of air and may initiate pernicious reactions within cells. In a way, the "airiness" of matter on both sides (an organism and gas, or a virus) is responsible for this interface, which would not have been possible if our bodies were not, at least in part, gaseous – if they did not engage in an exchange of gases with their milieu. It is this diffuse, not easily circumscribed, nature of physical and physiological existence that has come to the fore today, both practically and theoretically.

Many twentieth century authors, such as the aforementioned Husserl, Heidegger, or Sloterdijk, concentrated on a peculiar category of beings: not objects that are tangible and easily circumscribed, but large, enveloping horizons, milieus, with their moods and atmospheric conditions. Not the invisible micro-, but the inexhaustible macro-. Their overwhelming nature does not prevent the human subject from learning how to modify or technologically reproduce them, by creating all sorts of "micro-climates." The reproduction itself, however, backfires, given the unintended and unforeseen interactions between these micro-climates (treated, precisely, not as climates but as objects handed over to manipulation, control, and adjustment) and the climate, in which they are enveloped.

The very term "greenhouse effect" is an ironic one, with a Heideggerian touch, because it evokes the human tendency to build artificial and highly controlled environments, displacing the threatening void of space. Sloterdijk describes this tendency in his multibook project,

Spheres.²⁷ As a cumulative outcome of industrial activity, humanity pollutes a very large sphere – the atmosphere – with the half-destroyed matter of gases, thus endangering the *void* which, as it turns out, is also indispensable for living. We do need greenhouses, but humans themselves cannot have a greenhouse as their habitat. In the final analysis, humans are not *domestic* animals or plants, but savage ones, and, therefore, the "greenhouse effect" flips an "artificial paradise," set over and against "the silence of these infinite spaces," into a hellish experience that seems to synthesize the worst of both worlds (or unworlds).

The tendency of a human to surround herself with freely floating "spontaneous" objects – the gases – is by no means innocent. The existence of such spontaneous objects, their transformation into a milieu for other more important things, and the ultimate victory of the milieu over whatever and whomever it envelops: all of this requires an unconscious negative effort of neutralization and fragmentation, neutralization via fragmentation (a splitting that blurs our attention). Capitalism is not the only system that relies on the miracle of "spontaneous order" (supposedly emerging out of chaos); so does, also, liberal democracy, with its insistence on individualism, pluralism, and the spontaneity of political action, vital for its legitimacy. There is at least a constant anti-monopoly effort, in both cases, which is meant to prevent an integrative crystallization. Society and commodities must, in the last instance, be transformed into gas, which imbues with a fresh meaning Thatcher's famous statement, "Society does not exist," consistent with her atomistic understanding of human ontology.

It is here that "benign" ground-producing activity intersects with the danger of pollution: both in the sense that gas remains all-too-material, not spiritual enough, and in the sense that gas particles turn from nicely neutralized fragments of matter into *waste* as the by-product of negative-idealizing activity. The danger inherent in this double endeavor is, apart from the depressive material weight again bearing down on us instead of the near-void, that deliberate attempts at ignoring and neutralizing matter are not successful. A horrific remainder of under-killed nature emerges from the background of the void, from inside a seemingly secure space: a toxic gas or, worse, a virus – a spirit.

In bourgeois economics, those things that have not yet been incorporated into the totality of self-augmenting value are called *externalities*. Essentially, capitalist economic theory agrees with Lukacs: these externalities (let us say, these not-yet-gases) are only temporarily external to the totality of capital that, given enough time, will incorporate them into itself through the labor of translation into the language of quantitative value. Though not much can be said about them from the standpoint of capital, they are the sites of opportunity, of an ongoing

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27 See Sloterdijk 2011; 2014; 2016.

expansion and intensification of capitalist dynamics and the concomitant processes of rarefaction or gasification of that which stood outside them.

The dangers of pollution and of ground-producing activities evince the persistence of externalities within the abode of capital – not even on its margins, but right in its core. To be sure, the danger of the externalities within does not preclude the opportunities of profiting from them; today, perhaps, this is one of the most promising areas of capitalist growth, namely through investments into a desired reincorporation of such externalities. (Think of the medical industry and vaccination costs in the context of the new coronavirus, or of big-scape projects in geoengineering in the case of global warming.) Nonetheless, this reincorporation is powerless, when it comes to correcting the deficiencies of the negative-idealizing activities of capital: it is unable fully to eliminate the material remainder and, in addition, it triggers an exponential increase of the dangers inherent in the neutralization of matter.

With the combustion of fossils and of everything that falls into the amorphous category of biomass, the air is impregnated with particulate matter and with gases, such as carbon dioxide, that trap the Sun's heat in the atmosphere of the Earth. That is the basic operation behind the greenhouse effect. As smog, air is also rendered dense and even colored and visible, while visibility *in* it is drastically reduced. A medium, wherein things in the world were to be seen, has itself become an object of vision, canceling out the seeing of all else. In this, smog corresponds to the nebulous halo surrounding the sphere of attention and experience, the halo that is now the stuff of our semi-conscious quasi-experience.

The *material* rarefaction of matter through incineration, among other negative-idealizing activities, is responsible for densification in regions that had previously been more rarified. Receiving the remnants of burnt organic (mostly vegetal) matter, the air is a mutilated forest, a cemetery for past life perversely reanimated by the *blas* of industrial capital, the cemetery of the earth. The air, then, is filled with the ghosts of the earth, the earth as a ghost that, no longer contained in its own bowels, is released into an elemental region where it did not belong. Humanity amplifies the effects of its own physiological breathing with a techno-economic breath that expels massive quantities of the same gas our bodies exhale into the atmosphere, making the air unbreathable (for humans, though not for plants).

The density of air, filled with particulate matter that has migrated into it thanks to the failures of idealization, is a milieu propitious for the spread of disease and, not least, of viruses. It has been found, for instance, that the new coronavirus catches a ride not only on our skin and the surfaces of inanimate objects, but also on air pollutants, from which transmission to humans is possible.²⁸ Targeting our respiratory systems,

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28 Coccia 2020; Domingo 2020.

greenhouse gases and viruses – the ones *with* the others – announce the return of matter, the airborne cemetery of the earth and of the woods obtruding uninvited on the project of matter's negation, neutralization, and spiritualization. If, as Levinas has it, spirit is “the longest breath there is,”²⁹ then these different, albeit interrelated, ways of suffocating choke spirit itself.

4. Conclusion: To Rarefy or Not to Rarefy? That Is the Question.

Dialectical criticism has provided us with the methodological guiding thread in this essay. This means, concretely, three things. First, our targeted critique of capitalism and its ideology has engaged with atomistic science as a synecdoche for the object under critique. Second, we have provided an account of the theological, demonological, and medical symptoms that emerge when this ideology meets its limits. And, third, with a measure of irony, we have tried to uncover the general conditions of possibility, thanks to and in which capitalism exists, but of which it is not fully cognizant.

To sum up:

1. Capitalism tends to fragment, rarify, and miniaturize reality in order to reduce it to a historical minimum, to make it actually compatible with the abstraction of value that is the governing principle of all life under its regime. (It logically follows, then, that nanotechnologies and nanoscience are, above all else, the minuscule embodiments of capitalism in a nutshell.) The utopia of an idealized life involves, at the same time, a comfortable cloud of spontaneous chaos (gas), in which vitality would take its place, but which proves to be unworkable as a milieu for human physiology.

The language of capitalism, misleadingly, takes the form of nominalistic atomism, which replaces negative activity with its result: a particle, an individual “household,” a virus. The process of rarefaction is mystified and obscured, the scaffolding dismantled, and only the outcome available to sight (or not even!). In this capacity, the process inherits many of the features Marx ascribed to commodity fetishism. The energy of fragmentation is publicly accessible only in its objective form and, often, attributed to the ahistorical forces of physics, such as entropy.

2. Consequently, the negative activity in question remains largely unconscious and occasionally surprises public opinion with such things as a general upsurge in depression, on the one hand, and an obsession with the material fragments that happen to resist the frenzy of activity, on the other. Žižek nicely describes these fragments as objects that are

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29 Levinas 1974, p. 182.

“less than nothing” and rightly emphasizes that their role, for us, is to embody the very negation that has spawned them.³⁰ Pollution is a case in point here, because it comes from the material remainder of a number of idealizing and destructive operations; the void, in which we live, gets endangered precisely through the efforts to reproduce and control it. The material, taken as gas, is here nothing but a trace of the immaterial. The *toxic* effects of both gases and viruses are the living counterargument to the atomistic, positivistic, and capitalist picture of a world where everything is set apart and divided through “social distance” or discrete quantitative measures applied to reality as a whole (i.e., two variations on the theme of alienation).

A theological outcome of this situation is the new world of incommensurability (and, hence, of wonder, often mixed with dread), born from the one that claimed to consist of utterly commensurable, measurable, and controllable entities and processes. The incapacity of modern science to reunite the micro- and the macro-universes gets mimicked in the lifeworld of the everyday by two main obsessions with the outside: the uncanny spirits of viruses and the enveloping enormity of the endangered climate that metaphorically stand for the divine spheres of the universe itself. The combination of these two awes (the virus inside me and the starless sky above me) produces a breathtaking effect of uncanny proportions, a proxy for an infinite measure and an omen of a complete split between the (whatever actually corresponds to) gods and (whatever actually corresponds to) vermin. (Guess where we belong, then!)

3. Now, the critics that we both are might pause and wonder whether we should not just consciously assume what we have been doing unconsciously anyway: cut, break, isolate, while also re-introducing the very large and the very small into the orbit of our understanding, by taking into account their *absolute* scale and showing reservations with regard to these limiting experiences. The analytic and destructive activity of humans – the peculiar *blas* of our species – will probably always remain; we just need to remember the experience of being and nothing that makes it possible.

However, we should also look beyond the Kantian style of critique and seek, in the company of some of those working at the cutting edge of contemporary natural sciences, to reform our ideology of nature, for instance, by contesting organ- and molecule-based medicine in favor of a contextual, milieu- and symbiosis-oriented understanding of the body. In plant sciences, an analogous move rejects the mechanistic framework of traditional botany in favor of a study of plant intelligence, forged in cross-species and cross-kingdom alliances (say, with fungi and microbes in “transition zones” at the root apex). The same applies to contestations

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30 Žižek 2012.

of monetarist and individualistic economics that tend to operate in a more or less tacit positive feedback loop with the bourgeois understanding of evolution, of fitness, selection, and survival.

After all, the gasification of existence threatens and destroys not only the atmosphere and things in their phenomenological integrity; it also, and in some sense even more drastically, disrupts the subjective substrate of capitalist production and consumption: the utility-maximizing individual and her private fraction of property. In and of itself, extreme individualism (or social atomism, which amounts to the same thing writ large) is already a by-product of bourgeois ideology, but it is not the absolute end result, only a point of transition, a way station. The various contestations we have briefly alluded to are instances of an immanent undoing of individualism that, exacerbating the very energies that have produced it, end up at the other extreme of a symbiotic, context-dependent, and milieu-based interpenetration of rarefied existences. We may no longer recognize a plant as a discrete phenomenal unity, once it has been reduced to calcium pathways, emitted and received biochemical substances (some airborne; others circulating in the soil), hormonal networks, and so forth. But it is this rarefied reductionism, exacerbated manifold by contemporary plant science, that surfaces on the other side of the vegetal organism’s embeddedness in and mutual constitution with its milieu, with other plants and forms of life different from its own.

There is no reason why a similar line of reasoning would not hold for human beings. Marx’s dialectical thesis that, at the height of its success, capitalism fatally undermines itself with the very means that facilitated its success should be extended to the rarefaction, atomization, or gasification of our world and of human ontology, whether social or individual. Who could have put it better than Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* (I, 3, 590-4)?

O, he sits high in all the people’s hearts:
And that which would appear offence in us,
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and to worthiness.

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Contagion: State of Exception or Erotic Excess? Agamben, Nancy, and Bataille

Catherine Malabou

Abstract: In the present world situation, this paper tries to discuss the concept of contagion, state of exception and erotic excess, through the works of Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy and Georges Bataille. These two concepts are employed to make sense of the situation with the on-going state of the pandemic, its excesses and exceptions in all dimensions of life.

Keywords: sacred, sacrality, sacrifice, politics, sovereignty, Bataille

Sacrifice was initially supposed to heal profanation by decontaminating the profane. “Sacrifice” is from the Latin word “sacer”: “to make sacred, to consecrate, to make holy.” As soon as it was touched by someone else than a priest though, the victim of a sacrifice became “contagious” in its turn. It ceased to be separated from the human sphere, it ceased to be sacred.

Contagion is a profanation. Profanation is a contamination. Agamben writes:

“(…) One of the simplest forms of profanation occurs through contact (*contagione*) during the same sacrifice that effects and regulates the passage of the victim from the human to the divine sphere. One part of the victim (the entrails, or *exta*: the liver, heart, gallbladder, lungs) is reserved for the gods, while the rest can be consumed by men. The participants in the rite need only touch these organs for them to become profane and edible.”

Contagion is “a touch that disenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified.”¹ The sacred and the profane contaminate each other. To the extent that the sacred being is separated from other beings, it finds itself in the same situation than the contagious individual who has to stay apart. Once contagious, the profane individual reciprocally becomes sacred, that is separated, untouchable. Who has touched becomes untouchable. The common contaminates the uncommon. The contaminated gets sacralized. Ready for sacrifice. That is for isolation and death.

While powerfully analyzing this reversible passage from the sacred to the profane, Agamben nevertheless declares that nothing is sacred “per se”:

“The principle of the sacredness of life has become so familiar to us that we seem to forget that classical Greece, to which we owe most of our ethico-political concepts, not only ignored this principle

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¹ Agamben 2007, p.74

but did not even possess a term to express the complex semantic sphere that we indicate with the single term 'life'.”²

The idea that life — human life in particular — is sacred as such is a belated idea, sustained by a “mythologeme”: that of the “taboo” as analyzed by Freud, of the “ambivalence of the sacred” defended by anthropologists like Marcel Mauss, and aggravated so to speak by Georges Bataille’s category of excess. For Agamben, the difference between the sacred and the profane depends on a juridico-political decision. Mentioning the Roman jurist Trebatius, he writes:

“The Roman jurists knew perfectly well what it meant to ‘profane.’ Sacred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude. Any act that violated or transgressed this special unavailability, which reserved these things exclusively for the celestial gods (in which case they were properly called ‘sacred’) or for the gods of the underworld (in which case they were simply called ‘religious’), was sacrilegious. And if ‘to consecrate’ (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, “to profane” meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men.”³

The difference between the healthy and the contagious would then always result from of a political act. Just as there is nothing sacred per se, there is nothing contagious per se.

Life is always already captured by sovereign power. Such a capture appears as a paradoxical mechanism of inclusion that excludes at the same time what it includes. The interplay of separation and contamination, healing and contagion, isolation and contact, is rooted in this mechanism. The relationship between the sacred and the profane just reflects the logic of exception, which, in itself, is a machine. The machine of power that can exclusively function by separating the subjects from what they are, making them at once potentially sacred and contagious. This is not to say that politics is the transcendental condition of possibility for sacralization and profanation. The political capture of life obviously shares something with sacrificial rituals. Reciprocally, sacrificial rituals obviously share something with sovereignty. The problem is that they should never be thought independently from each other. Once again, there is no “sacred” per se. The distinction

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2 Agamben 1998, p.66

3 Agamben 2007, p.73

between the sacred and the profane does not pre-exist their separation. Separation is the origin of the sacred, not the other way around.

The first time one can see the adjective “sacred” associated with a human life is when the strange juridical case of the *homo sacer* was codified in Rome. The *sacer* was a man who could be killed without being considered a victim of either homicide or sacrifice. A killable life, inapt to sacrifice, inapt to profanation. *Sacer* but not sacred. What this case revealed is that life is paradoxically and in reality “unsacrificeable”, that is also “unprofanable”.

Agamben argues that “modern politics” has nevertheless succeeded in making us believe that life is sacred in itself, that all lives are “sacred”, thus enclosing the sacred into the religious sphere. This in order better to hide the fact that bare lives of the subjects are in reality stripped of all sacrificial, and consequently also profanable, dimension. Now that ritual sacrifices have disappeared, the political and social healing function of the separation between the sacred and the profane has disappeared as well.

Biopolitics has restricted contagion to a mere biological fact. Gloves and corpse bags have replaced the profanating fingers. The contagious living being is separated, quarantined, isolated, but paradoxically abandoned — desacralized. It dies without being “exposed to death”. The contemporary overinflated discourses about the sacrality of life are meant to occult the real status of *homini sacri*.

Let’s look more closely at the “mythologeme” characterized by Agamben as the “theory of the ambivalence of the sacred”. This “theory” has aimed for the most part at forcibly resacralizing the *sacer* by declaring it “taboo”, repelling and venerable at the same time. “The concept of taboo, Agamben writes, would express precisely the originary indistinction of sacred and impure that is said to characterize the most archaic period of human history, constituting that mixture of veneration and horror described by Wundt – with a formula that was to enjoy great success – as “sacred horror.”⁴ In Freud’s view, the taboo has not disappeared from our societies, even if it now exists under new forms. The psychic ambiguous attachment to the holy nature of life and death is indestructible, and cannot be saturated by politics.

For Agamben, such a view is the result of an ideological effort to illegitimately confer an auratic dimension to life, out of nostalgia, or blindness to the true nature of political power.

Can we be so sure that life is insacrificeable though? Is it and will it ever be possible to see the relation between the sound and the contagious, the sacred and the profane as a pure political facts, deprived of all symbolic dimension? It is now time to let Bataille speak.

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4 Agamben 1998, p.77

For Bataille, power cannot be sovereign without “prestige”, that is without this symbolic luminosity that pertains to its capacity to expose its subjects to sacrifice. Bataille would have responded to Agamben that there is no purely “killable” life. Every death is a sacrifice, because it is always in excess over itself, transcending its factuality. Such an excess Bataille calls *erotic*. Agamben never mentions the dimension of desire contained in the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Yet, such a dimension is irreducible. Confining the contagious immediately makes contagion desirable. Contagion is erotic because it irresistibly awakens the desire to touch. This desire in its turn finds itself repressed, separated from the realm of consciousness. Sacred.

No biopolitics will ever capture *transgression*, the way in which the sacred and the profane exceed the political. *The political dimension of the sacred and the profane is contained in their capacity to transgress the political.*

Such a discourse would be judged “unhelpful” by Agamben. “Bataille, he writes, immediately exchanges the political body of the sacred man, which can be killed but not sacrificed and which is inscribed in the logic of exception, for the prestige of the sacrificial body, which is defined instead by the logic of transgression. If Bataille’s merit is to have brought to light the hidden link between bare life and sovereignty, albeit unknowingly, in his thought life still remains entirely bewitched in the ambiguous circle of the sacred.”

Agamben’s analysis is indebted in a great proportion to Nancy’s concept of the “unsacrificeable”, developed in the text of the same name.⁵ He acknowledges this debt: “It is Jean-Luc Nancy’s achievement to have shown the ambiguity of Bataille’s theory of sacrifice, and to have strongly affirmed the concept of an ‘unsacrificeable existence’ against every sacrificial temptation.”⁶

Nancy’s lexical invention is rooted in the difficulty, the impossibility even, to assimilate the Shoah to a form of sacrifice, and call it a « holocaust ». Nancy writes: “A sacrificial interpretation of the camps is thus no doubt possible, even necessary, but only on the paradoxical condition of reversing itself into its contrary (from Holocaust to Shoah): this sacrifice leads nowhere, it gives no access.”⁷ Bataille would certainly have agreed with the “no access”. He would have nevertheless affirmed, though, that it is precisely this absence of sense that explains why sacrifices exist. If sacrifices were to be meaningful, they would precisely become ordinary murders, and stop being psychically desirable, that is contagious. In fact, the argument of the killable life of the *sacer* betrays a greater confidence in signification that the theory of sacrifice.

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5 Nancy 1991 pp. 20-38,

6 Agamben 1998, p.113

7 Nancy 1991, p.32

Though Agamben and Nancy recently had a small argument about whether the current governmental measures of protection against the pandemic should be characterized or not as expressions of the “state of exception”, it is clear that they are in reality in on the same page.⁸ Both agree on the fact that political awareness demands the relinquishing of the categories of sacrality (that is sacred, profane and the sacrifice altogether) in order to “lucidly” understand the meaning of confinement. What they are discussing is whether protection against contagion is a necessary “sanitary” measure (Nancy), or the pure expression of sovereign power (Agamben).

Neither of them seems to acknowledge the unconfessed desire of contact, the secret craving for getting the disease that arose with COVID-19. Neither of them seems to admit that protection measures against contagion immediately awakens the primitive desire of transgressing them, the craving for disobeying confinement and jumping into the fire. How is it possible to disavow the temptation of contagion? How not to be *bewitched* by the lethal potential of the disease? Who is not attracted to- and repelled by- the epidemic at the same time?

Because “the truth of existence [would be] unsacrificeable”⁹ (“The Unsacrificeable”, 38), as Nancy declares, contagion should remain confined within the confinement of the symbolic. I don’t believe a word of this.

Once again, how is it possible to assert with certainty that the dead from Covid-19 were only “killed” and not sacrificed by it? What about old people in care homes? What about those who are dying alone in hospital rooms? What about homeless people who don’t have access to food banks? What about people living in slums? What about those in India who have walked for hours, trying to go back to their villages after Modi’s brutal announcement of immediate confinement, just to find state frontiers closed? Are they just “homini sacri” or not also, and perhaps even first of all, victims of a “real” pan-sacrifice? How is it possible to not see them as *martyrs*?¹⁰

Bataille would have laughed at sentences like “it is time (...) to take action: both the end of real sacrifice and the closure of its fantasm”.¹¹ No, time has not come. To think that “real sacrifice” has disappeared

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8 . See Giorgio Agamben , “Lo stato d’eccezione provocato da un’emergenza immotivata,” (“The state of exception provoked by an unmotivated emergency”), *Il Manifesto*, 26 Feb, 2020. And Nancy’s answer “Eccezione virale » (“Viral Exception”), in *Antinomie*, 27/02/20200.

9 Nancy 1991, p.38

10 . In another recent text devoted to the Covid 19 pandemic, “Reflections on the Plague”, Agamben wrote: “We should also reflect upon the need for religion that this situation has made visible ». This is not, precisely, a “need for religion”, but the fact that sacrality has certainly not disappeared.

11 Nancy 1991, p.21

belongs to wishful thinking, and is just substituting a “fantasm” for another. It constitutes a “new new” “mythologeme”, that might be called the “theory of the monovalence of the political”. As if the “elementary political element” could ever be laid “bare”! Exception cannot function without its aura, that is without the accursed share that constitutes it as exceptional. Contagion is transgressive. Instead of repressing it, let’s make transgression contagious again.

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The Mask of Universality: Politics in the Pandemic Response

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Abstract: Proponents of wearing masks during the pandemic have argued that the mask is not political and simply serves public health. This essay argues that the mask is actually an important political signifier, a signifier that points toward universality. This is why contemporary populist leaders have refused to adopt policies mandating masks, despite the political benefits that such a policy would bring them. As an indication of universality, the mask represents a threat not just to populist leaders but also to the prevailing liberal ideology underlying the capitalist economy. The mask brings us into a constant confrontation with universality, which is the foundation for an emancipatory challenge to the logic of capitalism.

Keywords: Mask, pandemic, universality, psychoanalysis, liberalism

Trump's Self-Destruction

We should always pay strict attention when people act openly against their own interest. Such moments reveal the unconscious politics at work in their actions and expose what the articulation of a political position cannot typically state directly. At these times, we see the unconscious investment that sustains a political position. Acts that defy one's own self-interest are necessarily unconscious acts because we consciously always pursue our own interest.¹ In this sense, acts against self-interest are as revelatory as dreams, slips, and jokes, the three modes of unconscious revelation that Freud emphasizes after the discovery of psychoanalysis.

During the course of the coronavirus pandemic, we can see a blatant case of acting against their own interest in the leadership of two of the world's leading right-wing populists, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. As the pandemic began to rage in their countries, both Bolsonaro and Trump flouted the guidelines of medical experts and inveighed against wearing a mask as a way of combatting the pandemic. In contrast to most other leaders around the world, they refused to make masks mandatory and even went so far as to mock those who wore masks or mandated them. Trump poked fun at his electoral opponent, Joe Biden, for his refusal to appear in public without a large mask, which Trump interpreted as a signifier of weakness. Although Trump eventually relented and

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¹This is how we should read Blaise Pascal's famous statement about our uniform pursuit of happiness. This holds, provided that one is talking about consciousness rather than the unconscious. Pascal writes, "All men seek to be happy. This is without exception, whatever different means they use. They all strive toward this end. What makes some go to war, and others avoid it, is the same desire in both, accompanied by different perspectives. The will never takes the slightest step except toward this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who go hang themselves." Pascal 2005, p. 181. Pascal's claim doesn't ring true to us today precisely because we live in the aftermath of the Freudian event.

reluctantly accepted the necessity of masks (without, however, issuing a national order for them), he couldn't abandon expressions of derision for them. In Brazil, the congress had to override Bolsonaro's veto to issue a national mask order. What makes this recalcitrant opposition to the mask difficult to understand is that it cuts against the electoral prospects of both figures. As certain of their supporters correctly apprehended, masks would help authorities control the virus and thereby aid in boosting the leaders' popularity. No one sustains popularity by governing over the mass death of one's supporters, unless one has a foreign enemy to blame for the carnage.

What's more, if mask-wearing became widespread, the economic fortunes of Brazil and the United States would have stood a much better chance of rebounding, which is what both leaders wanted. The economic downturn that the coronavirus precipitated endangered the reelection chances of both Bolsonaro and Trump, but they consistently refused to take the simplest and most obvious step in the direction of an economic recovery. Their refusal of the mask has found a positive response among their supporters, with some going so far as to assault those who insist on the mask. These attacks indicate the vehemence with which populists cling to their refusal of the mask, and this vehemence suggests the power of the mask as a specific signifier. But what does the mask signify?

Right-wing populists recoil from the mask because it functions as a stand-in for the missing signifier of universality. Right-wing politics has its basis in the rejection of universality in favor of the claims of particular identity, which manifests itself as white nationalism in the case of Trump. The universal has an inherently leftist valence because it connects everyone together and enables them to see their collective interdependence. Universality represents a lethal danger for the identity politics that Trump and Bolsonaro practice. But the populist political position depends on followers not recognizing universality and their involvement in it. In order to follow the populist program, one must view oneself as an isolated monad that can acquire identity only through attachment to a national, religious, or ethnic project. If one apprehends one's attachment to the universal, if one sees that one is already part of a collective, the populist appeal necessarily falls on deaf ears. Populism promises the consolation of identity, but this consolation constitutes an effective appeal only insofar as the subject does not recognize its involvement in the universal. This is why obscuring universality is the foundational gesture of the populist program. The mask acts as a barrier to this project insofar as it constantly confronts the subject with universality.

Grasping the mask's connection to universality doesn't just clarify the role of and hostility to the mask. It also enables us to better understand what constitutes universality. What is universal is not something that everyone possesses in common. It is not our shared humanity or our common essence. It is what everyone shares

not having. Universality is a collective absence. This is what most theories of universality miss and also what distinguishes universality from domination. The universal is not a master signifier that demands conformity and imposes itself on different subjects—thereby eliminating their particular difference, as the critics of universality fear—but a missing signifier whose absence allows subjectivity to emerge. It is a signifier of lack that is itself necessarily lacking.

The absence of this signifier is what everyone must confront. It is a binding absence, an absence that connects us with every other subject. This signifier of universality is what Freud calls the primordially repressed (*die Urverdrängung*). The repression of the signifier of universality constitutes subjectivity by creating an opening within the order of signification through subjectivity can appear. Without this primordially repressed absence, there would be no gap within the signifying structure.² The gap in the symbolic structure, the empty space in the whole, is the basis for subjectivity. One signifier must be absent in order for the novelty of each subject to enter the symbolic structure.

In our everyday existence, this gap is not readily visible. We interact with others in a fetishistic relation that enables us to avoid confronting the ubiquitous emptiness by disavowing it. Thus, our primary experience of universality is its disavowal. Instead of confronting the universal absence, we experience images of fullness and completeness that fill in the gaps of the social order. For instance, rather than seeing the gap in a figure of authority, I take this authority as absolute treat it as a guide for my actions. Or I view the new pay raise that I receive as a form of completion. I miss the gap within signification by disavowing it, and in this way, I miss confronting universality.

This is what the pandemic gives us an opportunity to correct. By necessitating the wearing of masks to counteract its wide dissemination, the pandemic facilitates an encounter with universality. The pandemic makes the encounter with universality an everyday occurrence. The absence of the primordially repressed signifier becomes apparent through the mask. Every time I have to put on my own mask and encounter someone else wearing one, I experience a constraint on just doing what I want. But it isn't the capricious constraint of a threatening authority. It's the constraint of universality itself.

When we see someone masked, we don't all of a sudden have immediate access to the primordially repressed, but we confront directly the production of a blank space within the symbolic terrain. We see what points in the direction of universality, which exists at the point where something is missing in common. We are universal in our failure to have it all, and the mask signifies precisely this failure. This connection to universality is what upsets conservative critics, as they make evident in

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2 For more on the theory of universality, see McGowan 2020.

their diatribes against mask wearing. Their focus is always on the shift in attitude that the mask suggests. For instance, Molly McCann, writing in *The Federalist*, claims, “If everyone is wearing a mask, it telegraphs a society-wide acceptance that the status quo has changed, and with that consensus other changes can come, too.... Our new normal will include a permanent expansion of the bureaucracy.”³ That is to say, we will become more attuned to the collectivity.

The mask doesn't just cover over our face but reveals the damage that we can do to the others. The mask points to universality because it indicates that the Other, the formation of the symbolic structure, is lacking. The Other is unable to sustain our relations without the introduction of this overt blank space into them. The social relation requires this obstacle in order to function and keep everyone alive.

When worn during a pandemic, the mask reveals the absent signifier of universality, the signifier that doesn't fit within our symbolic universe. The key to the mask is that the primary protection it offers is not for the one wearing it but for those one encounters. It indicates that wearers treat the Other as lacking, while they view themselves as excessive. I wear a mask because I am a threat to others in a way that the normal operations of the social order cannot contain. The wearers' excess is precisely what threatens the lacking Other. The mask contains this excess and renders it less lethal. The universal is not only manifested in the subject's dependence on the Other for its emergence as a subject but in the way that subjectivity exceeds itself and intrudes into the Other. I am never simply myself but always extend into the Other, just as the Other extends into me. No subject is simply isolated in itself, as a liberal philosophy would have it. The Other forms the subject, and the subject constantly exceeds itself and imposes itself on the Other. The mask makes this evident.

The Apolitical Interpretation

In response to the populist rage against the mask, medical authorities and moderate political leaders have risen up to lament the politicization of the mask. Their claim is that the mask is nothing but a tool for public health and thus has no political bearing whatsoever. They insist on the scientific neutrality behind the campaign for masks and criticize those who seek to turn the mask into a political symbol. They recognize that politicizing the mask has the effect of causing certain people to reject it and even to become belligerent in their rejection.

Most critics of the populist leaders plead with them to recognize that the mask has nothing to do with politics. They lament the

3 McCann 2020, <https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/27/mandatory-masks-arent-about-safety-theyre-about-social-control/>.

politicization that wearing a mask has undergone. This is the position of Trump's own head of infectious diseases, Anthony Fauci. Commenting on the question of wearing masks, Fauci insists, “It should not be a political issue. It is purely a public health issue. Forget the politics. Look at the data.”⁴ Fauci's plea to not politicize the issue of masks is actually aimed at his own boss, Donald Trump, and Trump's followers. Fauci's invocation of public health as a contrast to politics seems to make sense. Masks do save lives. But what Fauci misses—and what Trump and Bolsonaro get—is that masks do not save lives neutrally. The mask is a political signifier, which is why populists rightly view them with suspicion.

When Fauci defends his use of the mask, he inadvertently lets on that his investment in it actually goes beyond pure public health and enters the realm of politics. After claiming that a universal mask requirement was just the result of following the data, he gives a political justification for the mask. He states, “I mean, it's sort of respect for another person, and have that other person respect you. You wear a mask, they wear a mask, you protect each other.”⁵ While Fauci's statement may sound to some like common sense, he's actually articulating a critique of the ruling liberal philosophy that forms the basis for capitalist society and the contemporary populist revolt. Fauci envisions the society as a collective in which the activity of each subject is directly involved in the activity of everyone else. His vision of a society of mutual protection is a distinctly anti-capitalist vision, not a conception of society in which each subject simply pursues its own interest regardless of its effect on others.

This is not just a slip into politics on Fauci's part. The mask requirement is political through and through because of the relationship that the mask has to otherness—specifically to the missing signifier within the Other. When we see others in masks, we don't see other isolated subjects but others who are intrinsically bound to us. The other's mask signifies what binds me to everyone else, which is why it cannot simply function as an apolitical tool for public health. Or we could say that the concern for public health is already a political concern because the emphasis on the public is intrinsically at odds with liberalism's insistence on the priority of the isolated individual. To invoke the public is to criticize the ruling liberal philosophy.

If we glance back at the origins of liberalism, the politics of the mask will quickly become clearer. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke makes evident that we exist first as individuals outside the constraints of the social order, and we enter into this order, which limits our freedom, solely to protect our goods. He writes, “The great

4 Qtd. in “Wearing Masks ‘Purely a Health Issue’” 2020: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-25/Wearing-masks-purely-a-health-issue-says-Fauci-RBwquCtUEU/index.html>.

5 Qtd. in “Wearing Masks ‘Purely a Health Issue’” 2020: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-25/Wearing-masks-purely-a-health-issue-says-Fauci-RBwquCtUEU/index.html>.

and *chief end* therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, *is the Preservation of their Property.*"⁶ As Locke sees it, the only reason to accept the limitations on freedom that society imposes is to guarantee the safety of one's property. His liberalism betrays an investment in protecting capital and thereby shows how intertwined liberalism and capitalism truly are. Of course, Locke would see protection of one's life as another reason for accepting limitations on freedom. But those who reject masks do not view themselves as endangered. Their interest, as they understand it, receives no protection from the mask.

The decisive point in Locke's treatise is that he suggests that entrance into the social order is optional, that it is possible to exist as a subject outside social constraint. Locke takes the isolated individual as the starting point. When one does this, the universal necessarily appears as an unnecessary and avoidable encumbrance. Taking this approach to subjectivity, Locke fails to see that it is universality that constitutes subjectivity. If not for the universal missing signifier, the subject could not emerge at all. This missing signifier creates the opening through which the subject's emergence is possible. Thus, the subject begins from the perspective of universality and emerges as singular only subsequently. Universality is the *sine qua non* for the emergence of the subject.

When one advocates for masks, one implicitly recognizes the priority of the universal relative to the subject. The mask is an explicit nod to others, an avowal that the subject cannot avoid being implicated in the fate of others. Every activity of the subject occurs within the field of the Other. But what matters is that the subject acts in reference to what the Other doesn't have, to the missing signifier in the Other. It is the absence in the social field that shapes how the subject forms. The mask's intimate relationship to this absence constitutes its basic political valence.

In this sense, Bolsonaro and Trump are correct to fear that the mask represents a political signifier that bodes ill for them. The widespread acceptance of masks indicates that people are not looking at themselves as liberal subjects. Instead, they are implicitly nodding to the universal. The challenge that the mask poses to the liberal philosophy underlying capitalist society leads to a different approach to masks—an attempt to twist the mask into the logic of the commodity that it initially challenges.

Commodifying the Universal

The mask points to what is not there in the realm of signification. It tells us that something is missing within the signifying structure, proclaiming that there is a point that escapes the control of this structure. This missing signifier is the signifier of universality—the signifier that collectivizes every subject within the social order. What we share is

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⁶ Locke 1988, p. 350-351

a relationship to the missing signifier, even if we have nothing else in common. This becomes foregrounded when we wear the mask. The mask thus represents a fundamental challenge to the capitalist order and its insistence on the isolation of the subject on which the system depends. The capitalist system must negotiate the mask in order to avoid having universality become apparent.

The missing signifier of universality is what capitalism, in its typical functioning, constantly endeavors to obfuscate, because a necessary absence represents an unsurpassable limit on the accumulation of capital. Capitalism disdains any such limits because they undermine the system's fundamental logic. It thus must create a mechanism that enables subjects to disavow them. It does so through the commodity, which facilitates the disavowal of absence. Rather than confronting absence in the form of the labor time that produces the commodity, we see in the commodity the possibility of overcoming lack by discovering the missing object that holds the key to our satisfaction. Commodity fetishism covers over what's missing with the promise of future completion.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx analyzes the role that the commodity and commodity fetishism plays within capitalist society. The commodity functions as a fetish that hides what is missing in capitalist relations. When we look at a commodity, we don't see the source of its value. This mystification is not a superficial effect that capitalism can do without but necessary for the commodity to perform its function. If we recognize the commodity correctly, it ceases to play its necessary role within the capitalist system. The commodity generates satisfaction for both the producer and the consumer, but at the same time, in order to do so, it hides the role that the exploitation of labor plays in this satisfaction. Due to the fetishism of commodities, Marx claims, "the definite social relation between men themselves ... assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things."⁷ The social relation that Marx references is the exploitation of labor—the point where lack, in the form of exploited labor time, intervenes in the capitalist system and produces the excess of surplus value. Capitalism transforms lack into excess, but due to commodity fetishism, the excess emerges as if by magic.

The key to understanding how the commodity functions psychically involves linking Marx's theory of commodity fetishism with Freud's conception of fetishistic disavowal. Although Freud never references Marx's theory of fetishism when he develops his own idea of it, looking at the two theories side by side reveals an essential kinship. Freud conceives the fetish as an object that enables one to avoid confronting the lack in the Other. At the moment of confronting the Other's castration, one confronts instead a substitute object, an object that hides castration and permits the subject to bypass it.

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⁷ Marx 1976, p. 165.

The bypassing of castration constitutes the central appeal of fetishism in Freud's theory. In his "Fetishism" essay, Freud claims that the shortcut the fetish offers on the way to satisfaction gives the fetishist an advantage over everyone else. He writes about the fetishist, "The meaning of the fetish is not known to other people, so the fetish is not withheld from him: it is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it. What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all."⁸ In a universe where everyone has to make do with lack in order to find satisfaction, the fetishist manages to find an object that promises complete satisfaction by facilitating the disavowal of lack.

What Freud describes as the fetish object has the same characteristics as Marx's commodity. Like the commodity, the fetish object allows the subject to avoid confronting the structural necessity of lack in the Other. The commodity promises the same nonlacking enjoyment that Freud's fetish promises. It is a vehicle for the disavowal of the Other's castration, the disavowal of the lack in the Other.

When wearing a mask, the Other's castration becomes foregrounded. For this reason, the mask works against the commodifying imperative of capitalist society. When we encounter the mask, we encounter the clear articulation of a limit. The mask indicates that the pandemic blocks the free flow of capital and interrupts the promise of an uninterrupted future satisfaction. The mask requirement signifies that something will always remain missing, that there remains a blank space within the commodity at the site of the labor time that goes into its production. In the limit that the mask poses, one can see labor made visible as an absence. Through its role as an absolute limit, the mask works as a counteragent to the commodity in capitalist society.

The capitalist system responds to the threat of the mask in two related ways. It initially praises the utility of the mask: thanks to the prophylactic power of the mask, capitalist exchange can get going again, even in the midst of the pandemic. When it functions like this, the mask's service for the capitalist economy works to offset its universalism. This is the position of conservative commentator Michael Brendan Dougherty. In an article for the *National Review*, he laments that the mask is alien to our culture but nonetheless concludes, "If masks can enable us to get back to business, we ought to be for it."⁹ Dougherty states clearly the capitalist imperative behind his reluctant embrace of the mask. Taking up this position, arguing that the mask is good for business, is not substantively different from refusal of masks. It simply takes a more indirect route to

8 Freud 1961, p. 154.

9 Dougherty 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2020/06/22/what-the-masks-mean/#slide-1>.

the same place, a place in which the logic of the commodity triumphs.¹⁰

But capitalism's onslaught against the politics of the mask goes even further. In addition to transforming the mask into an economic tool, capitalist society turns the mask itself into a new form of commodity. Masks become a new kind of style: one can buy a mask with the design of one's favorite sports team, with the insignia of a musical group, or with a designer label. In all these cases, what's added to the mask transforms the role that it plays. When a mask becomes a commodity, its relationship to lack undergoes a fundamental shift. Rather than signifying what's missing, the commodified mask gives one the promise of completeness. We don't see what's missing but instead see the intrusion of commodity logic, a logic that fills in the nothingness that the mask indicates.

The very fact that capitalist society struggles against the mask suggests its political power. It is not simply a tool used for the sake of public health. It is a signifier of universality that we must insist on. This insistence includes the refusal to allow the logic of the commodity to overcome the signification of a fundamental absence.

Facing the Particular

As the mask affirms universality, it also obscures the particularity of the one wearing it. The mask signifies the universal through its obstruction of the particular. One's particular identity is indicated by the face, which is what the mask blocks. The particular features of one's face—the facial qualities that give one a distinct particular identity—become elided beneath the mask. The features of the face create an image that can be recognized and that indicate one recognizes others. The particularity of the face leads to the dynamic of social recognition. Even when we aren't using facial recognition software, the face is constantly serving as the basis for social recognition.

Recognition stems from the social order, but it cannot be universal. This is because recognition always functions in a hierarchical manner. Some always gain more recognition than others. The value of recognition for those who receive it depends on those who don't receive it. Recognition serves to create distinction, to divide the social field into those who belong and those who don't, those who count and those who are worthless. The site of recognition is the face because the face indicates my particular difference, which is what people recognize.

10 In her essay in *The American Conservative*, Helen Andrews makes an inexact but nonetheless insightful attempt at finding a historical parallel between the Cold War practice of duck-and-cover and new regulations about masks. Andrews sees how the mask might itself function as a fetish, enabling us to disavow the danger of the pandemic when we believe in its protective power. This parallel not only requires masks to be totally ineffective (which they aren't) but also misses the radically different relationship to the Other inherent in duck-and-cover and in wearing a mask. Duck-and-cover is an attempt to hide the lack in the Other by providing a clear course of action that would protect us from an encounter with what cannot be mastered. See Andrews 2020.

For many thinkers, the face calls us to an obligation for the other. One sees in the face my particular vulnerability, and this vulnerability calls for one's responsibility. This is the position of Emmanuel Levinas, the great philosopher of the face. According to Levinas, the encounter with the other's face represents the ethical birthing ground for the subject. This situation calls one to an ethical responsibility for the particularity of the other as indicated through the face. As he puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, "The face to face remains an ultimate situation."¹¹ The encounter with the other's face has a priority over every encounter. It is the ultimate situation for Levinas because it provides the foundation on which our ethical comportment in the world rests.

Levinas separates the face and its ethical demand from the regime of universality. The face calls us to responsibility for the other in contrast to the claims of the universal. Rather than emerging out of universality, the face precedes the universal both chronologically and theoretically. Without the encounter with the particularity of the other's face, we have no way to get our bearings.

The mask represents a challenge to Levinas's picture of things and to the insistence on the importance of the encounter with the face. By obscuring the face, the mask creates an absence out of the presence of the face. Part of the face becomes absent within the field of vision. What we can't see in the other becomes the most important fact of the other. A blank space replaces the face and generates an absence that we encounter in the midst of the other's particularity. This gap in the other is the opening through which universality appears. The universal emerges at the point where the particular reveals itself as lacking.

It is the gap in the other, not the other's face, that makes evident our involvement in the other. What is most important to recognize is that this involvement does not concern the other as a presence but addresses what is missing within all otherness. Contra Levinas, others impact us and we impact them through what none of us have.

The hiding of the face obstructs our emotional response to the other. We are unable to see the other's emotional bearing and thus have no sense of how we should respond. The facial clues that guide our social activity disappear. We must interact without the usual subtleties that allow us to feel at ease. The encounter with a masked other is discombobulating for the subject because this encounter is deprived of the facial signals—first and foremost, the smile—that keep the social interaction going without a hitch. We confront a foreignness in our interlocutor that facial expressions—like a kind smile or even a disapproving frown—typically hide. But this is precisely the point of the mask's radicality. The mask takes us beyond the particularity of those with whom we interact.

11 Levinas 1969, p. 81.

Through the mask, the other with whom we interact ceases to be a bare particular and becomes the bearer of universality. The mask is a constant hitch in the proceedings, but this hitch points toward the universal. The mask allows us to become aware that the hitch in our social interaction is not a barrier to our universal connection but the primary evidence for it. We can recognize the disruption in the social order as the site of our collective relation to universality. When we cannot recognize the other or what the other is trying to indicate to us, we confront the interruption that is universality. The mask makes this possible by hiding the particularity of the face.

Unmasking Transgression

The fact that the mask takes us beyond the particular and to the terrain of the universal is the source of the hostility that engenders. Masks have become one of the privileged sites for cultural wars during the pandemic. The hostility that the mask arouses harbors a transgressive enjoyment.¹² The populist rejection of the mask unfortunately has all the enjoyment on its side. Wearing a mask helps oneself and others to survive, but refusing to wear one enables one to enjoy. In contrast to wearing a mask, refusing to wear one offers a surfeit of enjoyment. One has the thrill of transgressing the social norm propagated by the experts.

In the contemporary universe, the expert—especially the medical doctor—has become the primary source of social authority. Even if doctors do not rule nations, their authority openly trumps that of elected politicians, as the coronavirus outbreak has made clear. In most nations, leaders defer to the opinion of medical experts in calculating their response to the pandemic. But populist leaders explicitly do not defer in this way. This refusal enables supporters to enjoy transgressing the new authority. Following a populist, one obtains the enjoyment of obeying an authority added to that of transgressing an authority. This paradoxical situation maximizes enjoyment, which is why populist leaders are so popular, despite their many obvious missteps.

For a vast number of theorists, the emerging authority of the doctor represents a new and oppressive form of domination that characterizes the modern epoch. The problem with the doctor's expertise is that it involves an increasingly despotic regime of surveillance over the body. The medical expert takes the place of the priest with a concern not for eternal salvation but for salvation in this world through perfect health. Both forms of salvation have a high price—total submission to an

12 In his *Seminar VII*, Lacan identifies transgression as the only possible path to enjoyment. He states, "We are, in fact, led to the point where we accept the formula that without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*." Lacan 1992, p. 177. Even if Lacan's later statements contradict this insistence on the necessary role that transgression plays for enjoyment, it nonetheless does provide one possible path.

external authority. But the doctor's authority is more despotic than that of the priest because it operates through total surveillance.

The emergence of the doctor's authority involves a transformation in the performance of medicine. This amelioration requires enhanced intrusiveness, as Michel Foucault famously documents in *Birth of the Clinic*. Foucault writes, "Having become a public, disinterested, supervised activity, medicine could improve indefinitely: in the alleviation of physical misery, it would be close to the old spiritual vocation of the Church, of which it would be a sort of lay carbon copy. To the army of priests watching over the salvation of souls would correspond that of the doctors who concern themselves with the health of bodies."¹³ While Foucault paints the doctor as just another version of the priest, this figure is actually even more threatening than the religious figure. The priest polices the subject's activity on the lookout for transgression but tends to leave the body itself alone. The doctor goes even further, probing the body for indications of corruption that threaten the ideal of perfect health. The disciplining of the soul gives way to the disciplining of the body along with the soul.

Foucault's concern is for the new form of control and surveillance that the expert perpetuates. As the doctor replaces the priest, modernity increases its control over the bodies within its sphere of influence. It doesn't matter to Foucault whether or not the doctor actually understands real maladies or simply makes them up out of whole cloth. The point is that the doctor is a figure of surveillance that limits the domain of the body, which is why this figure earns Foucault's opprobrium.

From this perspective, the demand for universal masking functions as an extension of the expert's control over the population. Experts like Fauci, invoking concern for public health, become even more dangerous than populists like Trump. By extending the control over the body to what covers the face, Fauci and his cohort of experts restrict what bodies can do, which is the way that oppression works in the modern world, according to Foucault.

What Foucault's analysis misses are the holes in this new regime of control, holes in which the populist leader emerges in order to counter the reign of the expert. In other words, the expert's rule does not go on without a hitch in the way that Foucault imagines it. If Fauci's control was absolute, there would be no Trump. The expert operates with a fundamental blind spot, a gap in the field of knowledge where enjoyment is located. The populist leader acquires a popular appeal because this figure takes enjoyment into account, which is what the expert always fails to consider.

13 Foucault 1973, p. 32-33.

The populist leader does not simply disdain scientific expertise but uses it as a way to produce enjoyment for the populist's followers. The gap within scientific expertise is the site of enjoyment, which is what all populists exploit. By defying medical expertise (and refusing to wear a mask, for instance), the populist displays the enjoyment that derives from transgressing the rule of the expert. Even though the populist leader is actually in charge and running the country, the expert appears as the real authority whom the populist challenges. The populist exists only through the enjoyment produced from the defiance of experts.

Trump goes so far as to challenge the authority of the experts within his own government. His numerous critiques of Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx derive from the populist leader's inherent hostility to the expert. Trump cannot possibly endorse the expert's viewpoint without abandoning the source of his appeal and undermining his own ability to mobilize enjoyment for his followers, which is why he is so often at odds with people who belong to his own administration.

Refusing to wear a mask operates as a viable political position solely on the basis of the enjoyment that it produces. The position has no other compelling rationale. The appeal to liberty is flimsy since proponents do not view laws against nudity as an infringement on their personal freedom in the way that they do mask laws. They accept anti-nudity laws as well as all sorts of restrictions on liberty for the sake of the society's mores. But it is precisely this lack of a coherent rationale that gives the anti-mask position its power. The rejection of the mask does not stem from a coherent logical position but from the illogic of enjoyment. By refusing to wear a mask, one can really enjoy one's rebellion against the ruling authority in the contemporary universe—the medical doctor. The enjoyment that derives from this defiance gives it a political strength that we should not underestimate.

Transgressing the Mask

The problem with the campaign in favor of the mask is that it presents the mask as purely an instrument of survival, as the vehicle for what Fauci calls "public health." According to this logic, one wears the mask to help oneself and others to survive. When painted in these terms, the position appears as bereft of enjoyment and wins followers only through social pressure or fear of punishment. Survival does not have the capacity to mobilize people on its behalf because there is nothing enjoyable about surviving. Surviving is always dolorous.

It is tempting to imagine the gesture of wearing a mask as an act of transgression in order to popularize it. If it became more transgressive to wear a mask than to refuse to wear one, the distribution of enjoyment would change. All of a sudden, the mask would have enjoyment on its side. Wearing a mask would give one the enjoyment of transgression when one considers all the people who would reprove one's decision to

do so. This seems like the best possible solution: it turns the tables on the conservative anti-maskers and reverses the enjoyment quotient in the mask debate.

But the problem with this solution is that it ensconces us in the politics of transgression, which is always a particularist politics. The politics of transgression can never be universalist because it requires an enemy who installs the norm that one transgresses. Transgression needs someone to transgress. If mask-wearing were transgressive, it would require constituting anti-maskers as the enemy one transgresses. But universalist politics can never be dependent on an enemy. This form of politics represents the refusal of enemies. Its position is that even one's political opponents share in the universal: everyone collectively doesn't have the absent universal, and this is the source of the collective bond.

Instead of theorizing the mask as a badge of transgression, we should rethink it in terms of sacrifice. Those who advocate wearing a mask should be clear that doing so is an act of sacrifice. One is giving up the visibility of one's face and the convenience of going without a mask—not a small sacrifice. This sacrifice generates an enjoyment that can compete with the transgressive enjoyment of its opponents.

Ultimately, the enjoyment of sacrifice is a more powerful form of enjoyment than that of transgression. Transgression typically becomes tedious as one constantly requires the creation of new norms to sustain the enjoyment of transgression. Sacrifice, in contrast, provides a steady form of enjoyment. One gives up the utility of the bare face for the sake of the universality of the mask. One experiences this sacrifice on a daily basis and receives the enjoyment that it produces.

Undoubtedly, the time will come when we will throw away our masks or perhaps just pack them away until the next pandemic. But what we should retain as we abandon our masks is the encounter that the mask facilitates. We should treat the unmasked face as if it were masked, looking at the face not as an isolated particularity but as a site harboring the missing signifier of universality. By looking at the naked face as if it were masked, we see what is not there, not just what is. This is the attitude that the mask encourages. When we look at the mask, we must see that there is nothing beneath it.

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Acceptable Deaths: Killing and Letting Die in the Covid-19 Conjuncture

Warren Montag

Abstract: The coronavirus pandemic has both revealed the extent of the damage inflicted by neoliberalism on the infrastructure of public services and has reshaped the terrain of class struggle. The current period is marked by a combination of intensified state repression aimed particularly at the African-American and Latinx communities and its apparent opposite, a withdrawal and the calculated abandonment of the working class to the ravages of covid-19. The present conjuncture becomes intelligible only to the extent we understand the precise configuration of forces, the sites of their confrontation, and the effects of the outcome. Our interventions, even in theory, are only as true as the conjunctural effects they produce.

Keywords: Covid-19, neoliberalism, biopower, mass movements, Agamben

I want to begin by examining two apparently contradictory tendencies at work in the current conjuncture in order then to consider the specific conditions of what I will argue is their convergence, and the theoretical and political problems this convergence raises. We are in a war, not against the coronavirus, but a war in which the virus serves different strategic purposes depending on the objectives, both short term and long term, of those best equipped to exploit the resources it offers them. I will speak primarily of the US, where it is now impossible to deny the existence of this war, given its unmistakable visibility, above all the visibility of its violence. No one in the US would even think to claim that “we” are united against the virus when a significant part of the state appears determined to facilitate its progress. The pandemic is a terrain on which our war and the complex of alliances that unite and divide the forces in conflict, a thoroughly racialized class war, is fought. While this war is constitutive of the nation itself, its history is neither linear nor progressive, but is scanned by crises, reversals and periods of acceleration and deceleration. The pandemic allows us to see the asymmetrical accumulation of forces, the articles of their unification and the strengths and weaknesses of the coalitions that have formed on either side of the fundamental divide that characterizes the current conjuncture. The skirmishes that have taken place in the last few months instruct us to prepare for the possibility of a period of relatively open conflict (no matter what the outcome of the impending elections), the stakes of which are very high. Powerful forces have united to take advantage of the opportunity the pandemic offers to reverse every gain won by the working class and by anti-racist movements over the past century. Without in many cases knowing it or intending it, these diverse forces have formed a coalition of those who are convinced that covid-19 can be utilized, if managed correctly, as a kind of biological weapon that,

if allowed to spread throughout the population, will diminish the people's capacity to resist even the most draconian reforms. We have already seen that, at a certain level of efficacy, the ravages of the virus allow the addition of a supplement of violence (by state and non-state actors) to the lethal power of the pandemic. This is a war without an outside or neutral space: denying it is simply a way of participating in it. To cite Pascal, *cela n'est pas volontaire, vous êtes embarqué*.¹

Tendency 1. The pandemic has created the conditions for the implementation of a new form of siege warfare that, forsaking a direct assault, seeks to break the enemy by withholding, or simply slowing the arrival of needed supplies and medicines, by discouraging or blocking the adoption of the sole available measures known to stop or slow the spread of covid-19, and by harnessing the coercive potential of the market to compel workers to return to work even when the pandemic is surging. The objective here is to create the conditions in which a devastated and terrorized working class will accept concessions unimaginable in other circumstances. In siege warfare, hunger and disease are the most effective weapons of the attackers, and time is on the side of those who control the flow of provisions and medicines. In the present case, the national state, dominated by white supremacists and market fundamentalists, exercises its power, less through direct repression and violence, than through withdrawal and contraction, by refraining from any action in relation to the pandemic, except the act of “letting the market decide,” where and in what quantity resources (and lives) are allocated. Accordingly, the spread of the virus and the mortality it brings is secured, but indirectly, by invoking the wisdom of the market, manifestly superior to any merely human plan, or the moral principle of the individual freedom to decide for oneself whether or not to wear a mask in public, irrespective of the daily number of new cases or deaths in a given area. It became clear early on that the moralizing dicta “we are all in this together” or “the virus does not discriminate,” would not apply in the US, where mortality rates correspond to the existing racial inequalities very closely, especially where they intersect with class: African-American and Latinx workers are significantly overrepresented in the occupations defined as “essential,” meaning they were both exempt from shutdown orders and ineligible for unemployment benefits, and thus forced to work no matter how unsafe the conditions, exposing the workers, their families and communities, to the coronavirus.² This strategy is based on the calculation, not a subjective decision by an individual or a group, but an objective or non-subjective calculation, a cause immanent in its effects,

1 Pascal 1671, p. 21.

2 Hanage et, al. a 2020.

that the possibility of significant gain from the ravages of covid-19 is greater than the risk of revolt or social collapse.

Tendency 2. The strategy of “letting die” has never implied a relinquishing of direct state violence, which remains necessary, if only to compel those who refuse unnecessary death. In the case of the current pandemic, the widespread fear caused by the rapid spread and increasing mortality of covid-19 and the demoralization in the face of state inaction, above all at the federal level, had the effect of encouraging unrestrained violence on the part of police forces around the nation. Both the ubiquity of unexpected deaths, and the general distraction aided by the media's focus on the pandemic to the exclusion of other issues, including the ongoing police killings of African-Americans, created an atmosphere in which police and other law enforcement agencies decided that the moment had come to reassert their rightful prerogative of killing with impunity. In reality, there had never been a hiatus in the killing of unarmed African-Americans; the pandemic simply made the police more brazen and less concerned about the visibility of their crimes. The assumption that mass movements in defense of the right not to be killed or allowed to die could not arise in the midst of a pandemic, however, proved wrong. In fact, the frequent attempts to conceal the number of deaths from covid-19, together with the increasingly apparent racial disparities in mortality (promptly blamed on the victims), overdetermined the explosive reaction to the police killing of George Floyd and the killing of Ahmaud Arbery by White vigilantes. The killing of unarmed African-Americans by police or white citizens with near impunity suddenly appeared as a pandemic of racist violence that, as in the case of the coronavirus, would be allowed to run its course. Destitution, disease, and deadly force combined to produce a revolt of enormous magnitude that quickly drew Latinx and Whites (the latter feeling for the first time, in most cases, the effects of tear gas and police beatings). This movement was not purely spontaneous, but took shape thanks to the organizing efforts of Black Lives Matter; it dealt a massive blow to the Right and its mass base, and laid the groundwork for future mobilizations.

The spectacle of the first few months of the pandemic was difficult to believe: rather than use the opportunity to carry out massive repression, 60 county sheriffs across the nation (above all, those who harbored a special animus towards Black Lives Matter) refused to enforce laws mandating the wearing of masks, while judges routinely declared such ordinances unconstitutional and invalid. Governors in a number of states have forbidden cities to require the wearing of masks and the Attorney General of the US likened “shutdowns” as a response to a rapid increase in the spread of the coronavirus to chattel slavery. At the same time, all of those named above, together with their very vocal (and armed) mass base, advocated a total resumption of economic and social activity.

Another, quite distinct, group, urban, educated and liberal (in the American sense), and which tends to support not only the use of masks and social distancing, but in many cases the enactment of laws to require these measures, nevertheless advocated a full or partial re-opening of the economy and schools and universities. Moreover, they did so without regard to the status of the pandemic, and without any credible plan for preventing the assembling of millions of people (not only students, but teachers, administrators and service workers) in relatively confined classrooms or workspaces from leading to new outbreaks and prolonging or deepening the pandemic (as in fact happened and continues to happen). The nation, we were told, by liberals and conservatives alike, simply could not afford the economic and emotional costs of what was in fact never more than a partial shutdown. Few, however, followed this line of argumentation to its conclusion: the nation therefore “cannot afford” to reduce the ever-increasing number of deaths from covid-19, or to prevent the now well-documented long-term effects of the disease on as many as half of those who survive it. The phrase “we cannot afford to” is necessarily surrounded by silence: if explained, it might well provoke demands for the redistributive actions that would interfere with the progress of capital accumulation, broadly considered as the only meaningful measure of the nation’s wellbeing.

If we examine all but the most direct expressions of the policies that lead to the allowing of a great number of preventable deaths from covid-19, it is possible to discern a particular rhetorical strategy at work that may well come to serve as a sign of the specific relation between the visible and the invisible, and the utterable and the unutterable proper to this historical moment. This strategy is certainly not the result of an individual or collective intention, but is imposed upon the advocates of such positions by the prevailing equilibrium of forces. As a strategy, it is relatively crude, but effective enough to raise the general confusion to a level sufficient to allow the statements listed above to circulate without any real attempt to understand how the ideas they contain, stated or unstated, came to be thinkable or what the concrete results of their implementation would be. I refer to the now ubiquitous formula that consists of stating a premise that, in context, can only lead to a conclusion that cannot be stated, and whose absence in consequence must itself be effaced. Thus, “If we don’t get the economy going, the following will occur: . . .” becomes “We must get the economy going (. . .).” I have placed the ellipsis between parentheses to mark the conclusion present, but in suspension, hovering just beyond the threshold of the sentence. The absence of the conclusion from the sentence itself serves a number of functions. 1) It allows a variety of different and incompatible conclusions to be supplied by different readers, without any need to confront and attempt to resolve them. Further, it gestures at a cataclysmic event, some form of economic and social collapse, rather

than to the less dramatic redistribution of wealth to develop the ability to counter the threat of the pandemic, or to the supposed psychological effects of a temporary shutdown, as opposed to the psychological effects of 250,000 to 500,000 deaths and the long and painful recovery periods for an indeterminate number of the millions of survivors. 2) It forecloses possible objections that might be raised by the conclusion (e.g., that the effects of the uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus might have far worse and longer lasting effects on the economy than a temporary shutdown). 3) It allows the speaker to advocate or even simply to entertain policies that are certain to lead to much higher death rates, meaning that the largely preventable death of hundreds of thousands of people is acceptable, and preferable, to expensive measures undertaken by the federal government for a period of several months, without having to explain the grounds on which this level of mortality could be judged the lesser evil.

The ubiquity of this rhetorical strategy is striking; it reached the height of its popularity in May and June in the debates over the necessity of the resumption of in-person education at schools, colleges and universities. While many liberals, otherwise opposed to Trump, quickly saw the folly of restarting the economy while the coronavirus was spreading throughout the country, a significant number shared his approach to the question of whether schools, colleges and universities should open in fall 2020. Remote instruction (based on the chaotic experiences of March 2020) was deemed a greater threat to students than covid-19 (the threat to their families and communities was elided) and we were told we simply had to get the students back to school. Perhaps the most instructive of the published versions of this argument was made by Christina Paxson, president of Brown university: “Colleges Must Reopen in the Fall.”³ Avoiding any hint of denialism, and assuring students and their parents with proposals for testing, quarantine, and “perhaps” separate rooms for students in the dorms, concrete enough to offer reassurance but vague enough not to invite criticism, she appeared to offer a reasonable compromise—if, that is, faculty would accept a reasonable amount of risk. Risk here, of course, was individualized; it was a matter of an individual’s ability to tolerate a certain (moderate) degree of risk, which because the education of the nation’s youth was a stake, took on a moral dimension, evoking, without having the effrontery to actually utter the word, the ideal of courage (and of course, its contrary, cowardice bolstered by selfishness). There was little recognition of fact that no risk can remain individual in a pandemic. In the end it was the resistance of workers in the “essential industries” to the combination of empty assurances and crude threats, their superior knowledge of the particulars of the workplace, including the conditions under which specific individuals became infected with covid-19, that inspired teachers

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3 Paxson 2020.

and professors, now treated as front line workers, to organize to confront such initiatives. Although most colleges and universities finally decided not to move to in-person instruction, the number of schools that did so was sufficient to result in tens of thousands of cases of covid-19 within the first week of Fall term, with colleges and universities acting as super-spreaders. This was the absolutely predictable consequence of a decision, whose repeatedly declared, but never fully explained, necessity could be sustained only by a rendering absent of the obvious outcome from any communication of this decision. In fact, the exposure of hundreds of thousands to covid-19 was deemed preferable to a semester of remote-learning for the nation's students, a judgment its advocates could never quite bring themselves to acknowledge.

Certain politicians, less prudent but just as committed to the postulate that the nation cannot in principle afford a “shutdown,” even for a very short period, proved unwilling to ignore the problem of death on a mass scale, and publicly drew the conclusions that others were afraid to state, or perhaps even think. On March 23, 2020, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, announced during an interview on Fox News that the inhabitants of his state over the age of 65, himself included, would certainly prefer to die from covid-19 than see the economy of Texas hurt by the temporary closure of a significant number of its businesses. On the assumption, soon to be disproved, that covid-19 was primarily a disease of the elderly, he insisted that if they knew that by dying of coronavirus they could safeguard the ongoing accumulation of wealth, and save younger generations from the terrible burden of the public debt necessary to the effort to stop the spread of the virus (above all, by providing subsidies to wage earners and small businesses), he was sure that many of the 3.7 million people over the age of 65 would be willing to sacrifice themselves. This would be, he concluded, the “biggest gift” grandparents could give their grandchildren.⁴ A few weeks later, marking a month of the optional shutdown, a member of the US Congress, Trey Hollingsworth of Indiana, argued publicly that of the two threats, death from covid-19, and continuing the month-long economic shutdown in parts of the nation, death was the lesser evil.⁵ While most representatives of the governing party have adopted a rhetorical strategy that allows them to avoid statements as direct as Hollingsworth's, a strategy based on a general skepticism concerning medical research and the recommendations of epidemiologists, expressed in a series of sometimes incompatible arguments (e. g., covid-19 is a hoax, it is no worse than the seasonal flu, the number of deaths in the US is wildly exaggerated, and the great number can be explained by other factors), their positions led in practice

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4 Beckett, 2020.

5 Le Blanc, 2020.

to the conclusion articulated above. In fact, as they engaged in some form of denialism, hospitals in the Northeast were overflowing with the dead and dying, refrigerator trucks were parked outside hospitals because the morgues and funeral homes could not accommodate the numbers of the dead, and New York had begun to prepare mass graves.

How do we explain the widespread acceptance among politicians, CEOs and in media outlets of a great number of otherwise preventable deaths and their continuing advocacy of policies proven to facilitate the spread of the coronavirus? Or the drive to expose millions to covid-19 with no recognition of the potential damage not simply to the economy, but to every aspect of life in the US, even as the virus becomes more contagious and, if not more deadly, far more harmful to its survivors than was previously thought? Of course, the responses so common in the US are in no way typical of the rest of the world, although they certainly have their echoes in many nations. In fact, they stand in stark contrast to the means employed by the Chinese government, whose policies corresponded very closely to Foucault's notion of the biopolitical regime. As he explained, the objective of protecting and “fostering life,” the life of a population, easily gives rise to coercive and even violent measures.⁶ In some European countries as well as in Latin America, governments have used the pandemic as a pretext to initiate repressive measures against mass movements, particularly in indigenous-majority regions or urban areas with high concentrations of immigrants or racialized minorities, confining them in densely populated housing without any means of preventing the spread of the virus. This too is explicable in biopolitical terms: a calculated use of exposure with the aim of protecting some areas by confining covid-19 to others, those already deemed dangerous or undesirable, and allowing it to do the work of “threat-reduction” in a way that is both efficient and apparently natural and thus not the result of any action by the state.

The pandemic specific to the US, not only the virus and its frequent mutations, but the rapidity of its spread and its severity, was long in the making; the nation is now a kind of laboratory, better suited than any thus far available, in which a massive experiment is underway whose object is to determine the degree to which neoliberalism can defend the territory it has captured, and expand beyond what have long been regarded as immovable limits on the accumulation of capital. The experiment: what is the number of otherwise preventable deaths that may be permitted to occur under the conditions of a pandemic or other “natural” disaster (e.g., hurricane or earthquake) before a massive social explosion or collapse takes place. In the US, in particular, the completely unexpected severity and ease of transmission characteristic of covid-19 initially prevented any mobilization against the refusal of the federal government to organize

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6 Foucault, 1976, 138.

the medical and financial support to the people necessary to contain the pandemic. Further, in contrast to a number of other countries, there has been little enforcement of the stay at home orders (where they were issued at all) by state and local governments. In fact, when the mass demonstrations in response to the killing of George Floyd, the largest in a generation, took place, the pandemic seemed merely a backdrop. Rightwing commentators cited the shutdown as one of the determining factors of the protests; millions who would otherwise have been at work or school joined the movement to escape the boredom of staying at home, providing yet another reason to “restart the economy.” Few discerned any connection between the racial inequity revealed in the demographic details of the 100,000 deaths then attributable to covid-19, and the constant police killings of unarmed Black men and women: the former appeared to be a result of a virus beyond human control, while the latter constituted a pattern of deliberate acts motivated either by institutionalized racist hatred or the criminal actions of the victims. I want to argue that, without conflating the two phenomena or reducing them to “capitalism,” we can and in fact must see the links, both theoretical and practical, between the apparatuses that foster death rather than life, allowing a great number of people to die by refraining from the actions necessary to their survival, and those that simultaneously organize the regular killing of African Americans, and confer de facto and to a certain extent de jure immunity on their killers.

Several months ago, I referred to the “covid-19 conjuncture” as an apocalyptic moment, that is, a moment of revelation inaugurated by the rapid spread of the coronavirus globally, which in turn forced into the open, into visibility, what had previously remained, if not hidden, unseen and unnoticed.⁷ This revelation neither frees us, nor does it herald a salvation to come, but it has delivered to us a wealth of information about the recent past. It allows us to see that the catastrophe we are living has been advancing gradually for decades, beneath the threshold of visibility. Covid-19 unveiled all at once the almost unimaginable tableau of the plunder and destruction of public resources over the last few decades, including those concerned with public health. It turns out that the destructive “reforms” demanded of the debtor nations of the global south by the IMF and the World Bank, the structural adjustment programs that reduced state spending for healthcare and education, ended the subsidies that made food affordable and liquidated emergency food supplies set aside for times of scarcity, were hardly peculiar to “struggling nations.” In the US, however, the extent of the selling off of public resources and the outsourcing or privatization (and degradation) of public services, was carried out stealthily, more gradually, and often with little public notice or debate, over a period of nearly fifty years. The

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7 Montag 2020.

arrival of the coronavirus quickly revealed not only the human cost of the absence of universal healthcare, the inequalities this absence produced and the barriers it created to containing the pandemic, but even more strikingly, a healthcare infrastructure devastated by neglect, privatization and liquidation.

The problem was not simply that the nation was unprepared, but that, despite the warnings of epidemiologists concerned about the rapid succession of new viruses, SARS (2002-2003), avian flu (2008), and MERS (2012-present), the very notion of anticipating and preparing for such an eventuality was increasingly regarded as an inefficient use of resources. A more responsible approach, it was said, would be to calculate the actual risk of the kind of pandemic predicted by epidemiologists and to weigh this risk against the cost of preparing for it. Accordingly, as federal programs were eliminated, and states and municipalities looked for sources of revenue lost through tax cuts and declining revenues, more than 300 hospitals were closed between 2005 and June 2020, and another 100 are now in danger of closing.⁸ Hospitals were no longer seen as necessary public services, and were redefined as commercial enterprises expected to earn a profit. As they inevitably fell into debt, they were purchased by private equity firms and ultimately sold as real estate, their equipment dumped on the world market or simply discarded. The number of beds available for a mass event such as a pandemic declined significantly even in the hospitals that remained open, as emergency rooms and critical care units were closed or reduced, with investment directed to far more profitable areas (e.g., plastic surgery) in the name of efficiency and rationalization. Even the personal protective equipment, the lack of which has so far contributed to the deaths of nearly a thousand medical personnel in the US from covid-19, had become so scarce that within a few weeks of the pandemic's arrival, stocks were depleted, forcing physicians and nurses to wear the same disposable mask for a week or wear garbage bags for surgical gowns.⁹ Soon after, patients were forced to share ventilators, and even this expedient, undertaken against all recommendations, failed to keep up with the rapid spread of the coronavirus. In both the Northeast and in populous states like Texas and Florida, patients without beds were left on gurneys in hallways, while doctors working twelve hour shifts seven days a week could not keep up with the influx of cases.

Taking only the case of health care, one among many similar disasters, it is indeed tempting and finally unavoidable to speak of the abject failure, not simply of neoliberalism in some general sense, but of the Trump administration in particular: it has failed and continues

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8 Coleman-Lochner and Hill, 2020.

9Taddonio, 2020.

to fail to take effective action to stop the spread of the coronavirus, and has refused on principle to organize a unified national response. The term failure, however, serves in its vagueness to obscure the strategic coherence of the intervention: the Trump administration acted by refraining from action, by engaging in the act of letting things be, allowing the market to the greatest possible extent, and at the pace proper to it, to supply everything hospitals so desperately lacked, from masks, gloves and gowns to ventilators and CPAC units. This was the ultimate act of faith: to place the lives of 400 million people in the hands of the market. And despite the retrospective criticisms levelled by the leaders of “the private sector” in their belated attempts to distance themselves from the disastrous consequences of letting the market decide, they had been advocating this very policy for decades. Trump attempted to conceal the results of this course of action by making individual states responsible for procuring the supplies their hospitals needed, forcing them to compete with each other for scarce resources in a process to which the scale of need of the different states was irrelevant. As a result, the market even today remains flooded with defective products, and entire states continue to be defrauded by shadowy middlemen; by the beginning of September 2020, an estimated 150 million dollars had been lost to fraud. The administration’s response to the shortages of essential equipment was to eliminate or reduce the health and safety regulations that declared it necessary: hospital hygiene and safety standards, defined as fetters on the business of medicine, were relaxed or unenforced as a matter of policy. Legal limits on work hours were extended, and the responsibility for the protective gear to safeguard the health of doctors and nurses and to prevent the spread of covid-19 was shifted to those affected by its absence.

It was at this very moment that the Trump administration announced and soon demanded a re-starting of the economy: everyone should return to work, schools should re-open, along with stores, restaurants and bars. In addition, they denied additional covid-19 relief funds to replace lost wages, precisely to compel people to return to work, exposing them to infection without any reference to state of the pandemic. Trump and his supporters both inside and outside of government have not only not appealed to the findings of epidemiologists or virologists, but have repeatedly denied the validity of these findings because they point to a course of action incompatible with the campaign to send people back to work without masks. Their mass base, a significant part of which was already mobilized against the mandatory vaccination of school children, took up the anti-shutdown cause quite readily, already convinced that the medical profession could not be trusted.

In this way, Trump helped to mobilize a coronavirus denialist movement, a coalition of white supremacists, armed militias and the anti-vaccination movement, whose once distinct paranoias fused into

the conviction that covid-19 is a hoax perpetrated by the media and the supposedly liberal “deep state” (that is, the Jews). This movement, whose goals were never supported by more than 30% of the population, succeeded in intimidating politicians, as well as public health officials, whose warnings and recommended precautionary measures were regarded as little more than attempts to secure obedience of the populace through fear. Bringing loaded automatic and semi-automatic rifles to every mobilization, the anti-lockdown movement exercised an influence far beyond its numbers. Trump not only supported it, but repeatedly called on its activists to “liberate” their cities and towns from the tyranny of health officials who attempted to force an entire population to wear masks. However complicated the causes that combined to produce this unlikely movement, its effects are clear: it provided an activist base and a right-wing rationale for the capitalist push to re-start the economy, framing the few effective measures available to stop or slow the spread of covid-19 as evidence of the creeping totalitarianism of the government and an outrageous violation of individual freedom. The rural sheriffs and urban police chiefs who have announced publicly that they have formally refused to enforce ordinances requiring the wearing of masks, calling upon the public “not to be sheep,” have essentially withdrawn and left it to individuals, often the workers most likely to be exposed to the disease (grocery and warehouse store workers, healthcare workers, from physicians to janitors and receptionists, among others), to enforce the few measures shown to be effective in preventing covid-19. Emboldened by the anti-mask attitudes expressed by Trump and other rightwing politicians, far right activists have assaulted hundreds of workers across the country for asking that they wear masks.

It is not accidental that many of these same police departments and sheriffs’ offices have adopted a similar attitude towards the public display of fully loaded semi-automatic and even automatic rifles by the informal militias organized by far right and white supremacist groups. In a number of recent cases, police have expressed support for these groups as they move to confront the usually unarmed Black Lives Matter movement. The militias and other rightwing armed groups are de facto exempted from laws (which vary from state to state) restricting “brandishing” or “pointing,” a loaded weapon, or in some cases, even carrying a loaded weapon at all. Increasingly, law enforcement agencies have ceded to these groups the right to determine whether a crime has been committed, to identify the crime and to decide if the use of deadly force is warranted. The fact that it is Black Lives Matter that has elicited the most violent responses from these groups is itself revealing

The intellectual complement to the campaign to prevent the adoption of measures actually effective in slowing or stopping the coronavirus on a national scale, was based on the assertion that what was necessary was precisely allowing the unrestricted transmission of

the virus throughout the nation. In this way, the population as a whole will achieve herd immunity, a concept originally developed to explain how a high level of vaccination in a given population can cause specific, well-known diseases to disappear. In its popularized form (particularly attractive to economists) herd immunity could be achieved without the cost of testing or vaccinating hundreds of millions of people, simply by allowing diseases to “run their course,” unchecked (on the assumption that the antibodies produced as a result of the infection would guarantee lifetime or at least long-term immunity). Widespread infection would serve as a natural means of developing immunity, which by that fact was deemed superior to “artificial” means such as vaccinations. By permitting the virus to spread as widely as possible through the population, herd immunity would very quickly be reached. Because covid-19 was thought to pose a risk only to a relatively small percentage of the population, consisting primarily of the elderly and those afflicted with chronic diseases, some advocates gestured vaguely at protecting those at risk. Many others, however, careful not to draw the obvious conclusion themselves, pointed to their already advanced age or the responsibility those at risk bore for the “underlying conditions” that made them abnormally susceptible to covid-19, and noted the onerous cost of treating them.

In fact, an entire discourse consisting of eugenicist and openly racist myths arose in response to the vulnerability of millions of people, whose numbers, if reported, would present an insurmountable objection to this conception of herd immunity: in addition to the 50 million people over 65 in the US, 30 million have diabetes, 25 million have asthma and 18 million have coronary artery disease. Instead of calling the neoliberal version of herd immunity into question, however, the notion of co-morbidity provided a quasi-legal justification for the policy of letting die: the afflicted individuals alone were responsible for their underlying conditions. Overeating produced their diabetes, smoking produced chronic lung disease, while poor diet and a lack of exercise led to heart disease. The higher incidence of diabetes among African-Americans and Latinx, compared to Whites, for example, became a sign of their physical and moral weakness, if not inferiority. Covid-19 seemed thereby something like the invisible hand of natural selection, meaning that, as in Smith’s allegory of market rationality, only human interference with nature’s providential design could create a genuine crisis. Only by allowing a certain number of people, a number impossible for us to know and thus to set limits on in advance, to become infected and develop antibodies can we achieve herd immunity. Left unstated is not only how many people would have to die in this experiment, but who: the unproductive elderly, African-American, Latinx, and Native Americans, and those whose “bad choices” are the cause of their afflictions. White supremacist groups early on discussed ways of spreading the disease

within these communities, but soon discovered such efforts were unnecessary. Outside of the elderly, those most susceptible were also those most exposed to the virus by virtue of their jobs, their mode of transportation, and the population density of their communities, as well as the lack of access to healthcare prior to the pandemic.

From the beginning, workers in the industries deemed essential were forced to work to escape destitution, but neither their employers nor the state, at any level, made any significant effort to provide the PPE or secure the working conditions necessary to safeguard their health and reduce their exposure to covid-19. It was left to the workers themselves to force the employers to do so through thousands of job actions and community mobilizations. The overwhelmingly white anti-shutdown movement has, in response, particularly targeted healthcare workers, accusing them of participating in a massive defrauding of the public for personal gain, and repeating Trump’s claim that the shortage of PPE was a result of doctors and nurses stealing masks and face shields in order to sell them at exorbitant prices. In addition, far right activists continue to oppose rules requiring masks in grocery stores, in essence demanding that workers (disproportionately Black and Latinx) allow themselves to be exposed to the virus. Further, the profoundly reactionary mass base of the anti-shutdown movement allowed it to reorient quite easily to oppose a new adversary, Black Lives Matter, charging that the reports of police killings are media fabrications, and that protests and demonstrations against them are pretexts for looting and arson. It now functions as an extralegal arm of the Trump administration, threatening and attempting to silence even medical personal and public health officials who contest Trump’s demand to ignore the pandemic and get on with business as usual. Its success constitutes a significant part of the reason for the persistence of covid-19 and the high rates of infection and death in the US relative to the rest of the world.

How do we begin to explain this panorama of irrationality, deception and self-deception, as something other than the collective somnambulism of a great number of people determined by an inexplicable automatism to walk off a cliff and take others with them? By what casuistry did “the economy” (from *oikos*, meaning household, the place where lives originated and were sustained) become separate from, and given greater value than, life (the lives of individuals, as well as life in a global sense)? For many, the explanation is perfectly obvious: Donald Trump, the personification of senescent narcissism with its petty hatreds, irrational greed and crude racism and misogyny. This is a convenient illusion: it tells us that ridding ourselves of Trump will allow the nation to return to something resembling normality. The reality, however, is far less comforting: Trump (and Trumpism) did not bring the catastrophe, the catastrophe brought him, the prophet incapable of comprehending his own prophecies, and whose very weaknesses are the means by which

there has occurred an acceleration of the destructive tendencies at work for nearly a half-century, aided by the leaders of both parties.

We have arrived at the moment when the conception of the market as a secular theodicy, self-organizing and self-correcting and therefore incapable of failure in any true sense, threatens the existence of an ever-increasing part of the world's population. The market corrections deemed necessary to its efficient operation and therefore to the rational distribution of necessities (food, medicine, housing) pose a direct threat to human life: this is the contradiction in which neo-liberalism is caught and which if allowed to develop will lead to breakdown and self-destruction (neither of which are necessarily favorable to mass resistance). Further, it is not an accident that the promoters of the infallible rationality of the market are also promoters of the model of a self-regulating nature that infallibly produces herd immunity—if only well-intentioned epidemiologists and fearful politicians would refrain from interfering in its delicate mechanisms. Despite appearances, what is understood as failure is act of allowing the correction necessary to restore the health of the population or of the economy. If there is any doubt in the theologico-political origins of the popular version of herd-immunity, we need only point to the assumption, made without evidence and before much was known about the disease, that covid-19 antibodies would guarantee long term immunity, an assumption that now appears highly questionable. When we add to this the increasing evidence of long-term effects, including permanent damage to the heart and lungs, as well as the proven inability of the healthcare system to handle even a fraction of those who would require hospitalization if the coronavirus were allowed to spread throughout the population, we can see the extent of the denial necessary to any advocacy of any other herd immunity than that made possible by the widespread administration of a vaccine. To advance any other notion as a means of ending the pandemic is nothing more than the imposition of an abstract model (like that of the market, derived from the notions of providence and theodicy in which justification constantly overrides explanation) imposed on the reality of an as yet incompletely understood virus that, in turn, is rapidly mutating into a multiplicity of distinct variants. To subject the population of the US to an experiment of this magnitude, moreover, would mean persuading or coercing at least 200 million people (50% of the US population, a figure quite possibly too low to guarantee herd immunity) to allow themselves to be exposed to covid-19. But by what means would the state insure that the requisite number would agree to expose themselves? What measures beyond denying any form of government subsidy or assistance could effectively compel the unwilling to refrain from wearing masks and practicing social distancing, practices that inhibit the spread of the virus? It is true that in some states at an earlier point in the pandemic, there was talk of prohibiting the wearing of masks on the grounds that they interfered with

the facial recognition technology said to be necessary to the security of the community. But in reality, there is no need for such a law. Far right groups have mobilized against every attempt to require the wearing of masks in public, including in workplaces. It has been left to workers to impose such a requirement on their employers and on the public, store by store, workplace by workplace. It would not be easy to prevent them from continuing to do so.

With substantially less access to healthcare and as a result a higher than average incidence of diabetes, coronary artery disease and respiratory ailments, diagnosed and undiagnosed, and often working under unsafe and crowded conditions, the African-American and Latinx communities would see their suffering compounded if they found themselves through the coercion of the market or the law forced to accept a near total exposure to the coronavirus. Such measures would mark the fusion of necropolitics and necro-economics and their operation both outside the law, in the spaces from which the law withdraws, thereby leaving exposed those who inhabit them, but also within the law, in the interstices, silences or ambiguous spaces that exempt the use of deadly force by law enforcement agents from legal judgment. In this way, the most racialized effects of the law operate in the outside that the law has opened within itself. Phrases like “only if he feels there exists a threat to himself or others” or “only if he believes the subject is armed with a deadly weapon,” held up as limits to the use of force are generally non-falsifiable: only the policeman in question knows what he feels or believes, just as it is left to him to define “threat” and “deadly weapon” (a phrase by no means limited to a firearm or a knife and which could be applied to a long list of objects, from rocks and pieces of wood to any object of a certain weight that the subject is able to throw). The legitimacy of police killings of unarmed subjects rests on whether the officer in question “believed” or rather states that he believed at the moment he fired his weapon that the subject was armed. This does not constitute a limit on deadly force; it is nothing more than the dissimulation of the absence of such a limit.

But perhaps most remarkable are the reforms, carried out in the name of individual responsibility and the need to reduce reliance on the state characteristic of neoliberalism, by which states have ceded law enforcement responsibilities and legal privileges to private citizens. In the medieval period, the Roman adage *necessitas non habet legem* was invoked in canon law to exempt the poor who stole to survive from legal penalty. The modern version in contrast concerns the necessity of killing anyone I believe might pose a threat to my wellbeing or property, a necessity on which the state cannot legitimately impose any limitation or qualification. Not only has the category of justifiable homicide expanded from self-defense in the strict sense (killing another person or persons who demonstrably pose a direct, unavoidable threat to one's life or the

life of others) to homicide in cases where a perceived threat to life is avoidable, or is simply a threat to one's property (valued at more than \$500 in some states and \$1000 in others). The effect of these laws is to render a significant number of homicides legally indeterminable or to give the prosecuting attorneys and even individual police broad discretion in deciding whether to charge those who have killed others. The racial effects of these reforms are clear: homicides committed by Whites against African-Americans are determined to be justifiable at a rate ten times that of homicides committed by African-Americans against Whites. A number of observers have argued that the ease with which a killing of a black male can be justified as self-defense has created a new form of lynching, made possible by the opening of an exception within the law.

The withdrawal of the state under these circumstances has the effect of legally exposing Black and Latinx populations to the racist violence of vigilantes and militias (the latter especially on the US-Mexico border), just as the freedom not to wear a mask (a freedom exercised overwhelmingly by Whites), and the freedom of employers not to provide masks, exposes the same populations (and the White workers who labor with them) to covid-19 under the most dangerous possible conditions. We are now confronted with the paradox that the era of mass incarceration and the militarization of the police at every level, was simultaneously the era when ordinary citizens in nearly half the states in the US were granted the freedom to kill those "who posed a threat to their property" using the vast array of military grade weaponry they were legally permitted to acquire. Tens of thousands formed armed militias to safeguard the nation's southern border from the invasion of rapists and murderers they were warned was imminent, to protect cities threatened by Black Lives Matter, or to prevent a tyrannical government from requiring the populace to wear a mask in public. In the spaces abandoned by law, or the zones of exception the law hollowed out within itself, a new form of fascism took shape.

Law as abandonment, zones of exception: in one sense, the work of Giorgio Agamben allows us to understand how states can exercise power by refraining from action at certain precise moments, like a pandemic, when in the absence of a mobilization of institutions, personnel and resources, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, will die, while many more will suffer long term or permanent effects. Like all of Agamben's formulations concerning the exception, the notions of ban and abandonment, too, are ideal figures abstracted from the configuration of forces that characterizes their concrete existence. The state of exception, decreed by the sovereign power as imagined by both Schmitt and Agamben, remains nothing more than a juridical ideal that can never be realized, given that the forces against which it is declared will never be reduced to zero and more often than not continue to resist, although from a position unthinkable in Agamben's terms, a position neither inside the

law nor within the outside that remains the law's outside. The theoretical and political price Agamben pays for this error is considerable; it is compounded when the concept of exception is tied to Agamben's notion of "*la nuda vita*," or "bare life," a notion whose contradictions he has recently resolved, guided by the spirit of Hannah Arendt rather than Walter Benjamin, in a manner that is politically catastrophic.

In the face of a pandemic that he initially insisted was a hoax perpetrated by the state to extend its control over the population, and no worse than the seasonal flu, his text, "Clarification," shows that the problem is less the state or the sovereign power (totally absent from his text in which the state of exception simply "is declared") imposing, by the threat of force, strict limitations on movements and gatherings, than the people themselves:

Our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything — the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions — to the danger of getting sick.

*La nostra società non crede più in nulla se non nella nuda vita. È evidente che gli italiani sono disposti a sacrificare praticamente tutto, le condizioni normali di vita, i rapporti sociali, il lavoro, perfino le amicizie, gli affetti e le convinzioni religiose e politiche al pericolo di ammalarsi.*¹⁰

Let us leave to the side Agamben's attempt to reduce the threat of covid-19 to that of "getting sick," a not very subtle attempt to trivialize the suffering and death already evident in Italy in mid-March. What is far more significant is the assertion that the people have become "so accustomed to living in perennial crisis and perennial emergency" that they are prepared "to sacrifice practically anything" to avoid even the inconvenience of "getting sick." Among the sacrifices, inserted between "social relationships" and "friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions," is "work." Out of fear of the pandemic (at least he does not use the word "cowardice," although it is hovering nearby) the people are willing to sacrifice work. What Agamben fails to note are the number of people sacrificed to work, to "the economy," working without the proper equipment and under unsanitary conditions and dying by the thousands, the doctors, nurses, hospital cleaners, ambulance drivers, administrative staff at hospitals, and any health and social care workers working in the community or other settings, the people working in public services (such as emergency response, public transport workers, trash collectors,) as well those working in businesses allowed to remain open during the pandemic such as grocery stores and people providing delivery services. Then, of course, there were those who could not afford to sacrifice work, the migrants who perform nearly all the agricultural labor,

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whose living and working conditions proved ideal for the transmission of the coronavirus and who were blamed for bringing the pandemic to Italy.

But the most revealing statements are that “our society no longer believes in anything but bare life [*la nostra società non crede più in nulla se non nella nuda vita*]” and that “bare life — and the danger of losing it— is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them [*la nuda vita – e la paura di perderla – non è qualcosa che unisce gli uomini, ma li acceca e separa*]. The first concerns belief or faith: the people no longer believe in anything other or more than bare life, which he himself defines as their biological existence. To go on living, to avoid death and to enjoy what is necessary to our vital existence, become for Agamben contemptible actions, a reduction of what is authentically the human to the animal (even if our biological existence would appear to be the condition of “anything more”). But how many mass movements have arisen from a fear of hunger or some other physical necessity, and quickly became a force of active, collective indignation? From the poor gathering wood in the Prussian forest with the aim of preventing hypothermia, the landless peasants who seize a few acres of land to grow crops to feed their families, to the workers who strike because a cut in wages means that both they and their communities will go hungry: are these too reducible to animalistic bare life? In fact, these movements are irreducibly collective in nature, composed of individuals unified by the conditions of their labor and the imperatives of the struggle in which they are engaged. The workers today fighting for the ability to protect themselves against the pandemic are not acting out of panic, but neither can they afford to adopt some form of denialism (above all, high-sounding and utterly empty phrases, like “medicine is the new religion”). Among so much obfuscation and deception (the most destructive form of which is self-deception) their struggle, like the struggle against police killings (another struggle for bare life?), touches the real. The place they occupy is the site from which the present phase of racialized class war, and the place of the current pandemic (and those certain to come) in it, become intelligible: *a conoscere bene la natura de' principi, bisogna essere popolare* (Machiavelli). We have everything to learn from the working class and the popular masses as they wage their struggle for life and against death.

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Still Too Human

Jean-Luc Nancy

Is it possible for us to take stock of what has transpired? Not, of course, so as to draw some final, definitive conclusion which would allow us to consider the matter closed; but, rather, in the hopes of establishing some points of reference, of taking note of some of the main landmarks we've encountered in the course of our voyage across the viral seas. Viral ocean, but a discursive one too—for we have also been carried away by that flow of discourse, the logorrhea, which accompanies every pandemic. There's too much of it; it swirls and shifts around us to such a degree that the word "philosophy" comes to resemble the twists of a grapevine or the rings slinking around the body of a hissing snake. It is human, all too human—but perhaps this is precisely what was needed. Perhaps we needed to be just slightly all too human in order to understand ourselves a bit less poorly (*moins mal nous comprendre...*).

Is such the case? has this maelstrom kicked up from its depths any curiosities, any flotsam worth lingering over? I think it has. Without calling them "discoveries," I think it is nevertheless possible for us to take note one or two beacons, a few signposts that might help us for the long haul we have in store.

There are at least five which come to mind, and which we can arrange under the following rubrics: 1) experience (*expérience*) – 2) self-sufficiency – 3) bioculture – 4) equality – 5) the point.

Let us see where they lead.

1. Experience.

We have experienced something on the order of an experiment, and still are (*nous faisons encore une expérience*).¹ And what is at stake in that experience, or experimentation, is the experience—the ordeal (*l'épreuve*)—of an unprecedented form of reality. Strictly speaking, that which will have constituted the unprecedented aspect of everything we've experienced is the emergence of a contagion which has spread virtually across the world—one which is also especially complex and reactive, liable to change in cunning and unpredictable ways. Every experience [experiment] is the experience of (an) uncertainty. Certainty, that is to say, knowledge sure *in and of* itself, is the distinguishing feature of what we call the Cartesian truth. Yet far from being the sole prerogative of the French, this (ideal) certainty structures all of our representations of knowledge, whether scientific, technological, societal, political, and even perhaps cultural. What is being put to test, in other words, is the entire order that allows us to experience certainty—our sense of assuredness or confidence in the reliability of (that) order. For this reason, one could say that we really are undergoing an experiment. Things are not going

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¹ Nota bene: in French, this syntagme can be read as suggesting that what is at stake is also potentially an experiment of sorts. *Nous faisons encore une expérience* could also be read as, "we have been, and continue to be, the subjects of an experiment," the outcome of which is as yet unclear.

according to plan, and here we are: thrust into uncharted territory.

None of this is new. Uncertainty has been stirring for several decades now, as the shape of the world has undergone a seemingly unending series of changes and our bumbling and self-inflicted disasters increasingly managed to catch us off-guard. Yet all those political, ecological, migratory/geopolitical and financial-economic warning-signs combined never managed to take on the strength or force of an experience in the way that a microscopic little parasite has – by endowing the uncertainty we are traversing or experiencing with the uncanny transmissibility, the virulence, of the unprecedented (*l'inouï*). The unprecedented (*l'inouï*), more often than not, is in fact something we are already well aware of—we've already heard about it²—without realizing or accepting it. Experience forces us to do so, to accept it.

To undergo an experience means being perpetually lost. One is at a loss (*On perd la maîtrise*). In a certain way, we are never really the subject of our own experience(s). Rather, it is experience which brings about a new subject. An other “we” is in the making. An experience either surpasses or exceeds us, or it is not in fact an experience. To comprehend it, to identify it, entails integrating an experience into a plan or programme for experimentation, which is all about *différends*, incommensurate outcomes. And when we are without a programme or agenda, we brush up against the unquantifiable, that which, by definition, is priceless; valuable in and of itself, absolutely.

2. Self-sufficiency.

Alongside our sense of certainty or assuredness, it will come as no surprise that our sense of self-sufficiency, of autonomy or self-reliance, has been shaken. And this is true whether we are concerned with the self-sufficiency of the individual, of the group, of the State or of any number of international institutions, of scientific or moral authorities. In any event, what we have seen is a revival of interdependence: that interdependence which is the hallmark of the virus as well as of solidarity, of physical distancing as well as of mutual consideration. It is interdependence that we see in both that sense of cohesion which consists in observing and obeying rules as well as in the anarchy that impels [us] towards complete reinvention.

What constitutes perhaps the most important point of reference, what perhaps most seriously forms a landmark in this rattling of our

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²The author in this passage is playing on the semantic and formal lability of the term in French, *l'inouï*. In its nominal form “*l'inouï*” could be rendered as “the unprecedented”, yet it in its adjectival form the term conjures to mind a quality of the astonishing or unbelievable, if not the uncanny, while also, strictly speaking in this case, evoking the question of hearing (*l'ouïe, ouïr*) and understanding (*entendre* → to hear, to understand). Thus, the “in-oui” could be taken here as the signature for a kind of unconscious event – something we are aware of having heard without understanding it, or of understanding without truly grasping the nature or implications of what it is we are hearing.

sense of “self-sufficiency” concerns the theme of the “auto”.³ And indeed what more concrete emblem or figure—with all its breakdowns and emergencies, the formidable question of all its transformations and its role in society—could we hope to find for this theme than that of the automobile? The *auto-*, the “by one-self” (to return to yet another important Cartesian motif), autonomous will, consciousness of self, self-determination, automation, sovereign autonomy, each constitutes a sharp cornerstone in the (technological and self-proclaimed [*auto-proclamée* democratic) Occidentalo-Global fortress.

It is this fortress which is today in the midst of both breaking apart and reconfiguring itself. We had been expecting totalized man (*un homme total*). We find ourselves instead with a multitude totalized, rather, by an inhumanity, or at the very least by a serious concern about its ability to be self-sufficient. Whatever angle or approach we try to take, this multitude is either too much or too little: too amorphous and knowing too little, too numerous and too loosely or weakly bound together, too powerful and yet too incapable. Too autonomous, above all, and not self-regulated enough (*trop peu autorégulée*).

Self-sufficiency—which no philosopher, not even Descartes and not even Hegel, accepted and which all thought from Nietzsche onward has called into question—could very well be that against which modernity runs up hard. From “Know thyself” (Socrates) to “Affect thyself” (Schlegel), runs the ambiguity that leads us to forget that the “(self) same” is always an other. This is why appeals to altruism fall on deaf ears: they invoke an external, extrinsic other. But what structures and fuels any identity, whether that of a person, a people, or a species, is an intrinsic alterity.

And along with the “auto”, sufficiency in general finds itself called into question: for what is it that might suffice—satisfy or be enough—for that thing which is always at once too much and too little; that thing which, instead of being satisfied with being, content simply “to be,” becomes, desires and dies—that is to say, which lives and exists?

3. Bioculture.

By bioculture I do not mean the study of living tissues in a laboratory, but rather our culture in so far as the semi-signifier “bio” looms over it like a bright, flashing light. We have conferred upon this signifier, “bioculture,” a meaning close to “organic life” (as opposed to its ancient understanding as a “way of living/ of conducting oneself”), and placed it at the heart of our concerns and preoccupations ever since we began to endanger existence as such for the whole of living beings on earth. *Bios* needs to be protected, cared for, cultivated—whence the great store we set in

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³The play here manifestly concerns the prefix « auto » (Gr. → self, by oneself) in « *auto-suffisance* » (self-sufficiency).

the dangers posed to it by the “biopolitical” (a term generally used to call into disrepute any calculus of profitabilities and productivities of a given population). Yet here we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic which offers nothing if not a prominent occasion for celebrating the management of public health (it matters little whether such management takes place in an autocratic or libertarian/liberal manner) and thus, in theory, of *the totality of the conditions of social, and, by extension, individual life as well*. Biopolitics—already a dubious concept to begin with—takes a tumble and falls short here, which may in turn help shed some light on the problem at hand.

In a certain sense, this reversal [**of critical fortunes?**] can be seen as part of a larger, much older move towards an ideal of health, the asymptotic goal of which would be—unsurprisingly—the limitless self-sustaining of human life (an open-ended self-perpetuation of human life that would offer, furthermore, a stark contrast with the conditions to which other forms of life are subjected). One might wonder, then, if it behooves us to place our expectations or hopes for a truly flourishing democracy in biological policy / **a politics of biologism**. Would a politics of life and of care correspond to the rule of “living well” (*eu zèn*) that Aristotle identifies as the ultimate goal of the *polis*?

Of course it wouldn’t. We know this. The pandemic has amply shown that the well-being of an individual or collective life is not defined by avoiding viruses. *Bios* does not suffice for us to obtain the *eu zèn*. But if we refuse at the same time to allow ourselves to be carried away by the spiraling cycles of production and consumption, it then encumbers upon us to redefine what it means “to live well”. And this redefinition cannot elude the question of death, or of illness and, more generally speaking, of the accidents and unforeseeable events that are an intrinsic (to come back to this word) part of life. Put a little differently, given that our society no longer provides space for the representation of an “other life,” we need to be able to think life beyond the question of *bios*. We are going to have to continue to grapple with the polysemia, the overdetermination that Derrida touched upon, of the word “sur-vival”.

At stake, here, is also something that exceeds politics, provided we are willing to stop abusing this latter term by forcing it to name some vague semantic totality in which we are no longer able to discern between governance and existence.

Bios, polis, life and the city have come to rank amongst the murkiest of our signifiers—and no algorithm is going to come up with new meanings for them. We are going to have to come up with another language, give up on our rusty Greek.

4. Equality.

All of the preceding has been leading up to this point. Thrown together into an experience in which we encounter the limits of our autonomy as

well as those of our lives, we also find ourselves confronting the question of an equality that we all claim to believe in and adhere to, but which, in reality, is being fundamentally tested and—violently—undermined everywhere around us everyday. The reactions that we saw in countries throughout the developed world related to freedom (*la liberté*)—for instance, our little everyday freedom to take a walk—were, for that matter, much more intense than any related to the inequalities that the pandemic forced into view in those same countries, especially where social and sanitary protections were concerned. At no point did anyone appeal to Balibar’s concept of “equaliberty.”

And yet we know all too well that inequality has never been as acute as it is today. That is to say, never before have the forces of inequality been as widespread and powerful, nor as intolerable. For there was inequality structurally built into the social hierarchies of bygone eras that have not been replaced—quite to the contrary—by the real, symbolic and imaginary hierarchies of the technological-financial epoch [**regime?**].

Our civilization takes as one of its basic principles a form of equality that it imagines as founded in the equal worth/value (or dignity) of every human life (let us leave to one side the otherwise necessary and important question of what it does with other forms of life). In sum, life is what produces, imparts or bestows equality. “Men are born free and equal,” as the 1789 Declaration affirms. The verb “to be born,” in that statement, is carrying a great deal of weight. Is “being born” not a biological phenomenon? If it is not, what is at stake in the (f)act of being born? I won’t linger longer with such questions—except to note that they apply also to the question of death, to the verb “to die”.

Today, one thing has become abundantly clear: we do not know what it is that makes us equal. This is surely why, more often than not, we content ourselves with simply proclaiming our equality, or projecting it off onto the horizon of some “better world”. Yet more and more, real inequality, the reality of inequality, requires us to no longer be satisfied with a delayed or deferred response to inequality. While today it no longer formally or schematically corresponds to the logic of class struggle, the impetus, the pressure, behind this response is no less compelling or powerful: there is no reason that there should be a category of the “wretched of the earth” (and therefore, no excuse for there to be a life of misery, lives defined by being stuck in a kind of “hell on earth” [*des vies de damnés*]) if the purpose or point [*raison d’être*] of life is to be born and to die rather than to accumulate things, commodities, forms of power and knowledge, capacities. Or rather: if our reason for living can only be found(ed) in the reasonlessness of a kind of surplus-life (*plus-que-vivre*) comparable to that of Angelus Silesius’ rose: “The rose is without why, / Flourishing because it flourishes, / Not worried about self, / Not seeking to see if it is seen.”

Is this not precisely what it is to be human? All too human? yet who could give the measure of [the verbs] to be born and to die, of appearance and disappearance?

The point.

I would like to be brief, and simply underscore that what's important here is not the endpoint at which one sums up and takes stock. The point here is a dimensionless, non-situatable one. Simply a tipping point; a point of rupture, or of revolution.

Is it possible for us to take the point of “why-lessness” [*le sans pourquoi*] as the measure for our civilisation? If we are unable to, it strikes me as unlikely or uncertain that we will get very much further along in our—already shaky—trajectory. All the rest is just viral commotion.

Could we be too human enough to do without the “why”? But is this not something that, deep down, we vaguely and confusedly grasp already as we go about in our daily lives? We unconsciously know, spontaneously, that the “for-no-reason” [*sans raison*] is more powerful, it is stronger than all reason and any ratio. Like the bloom of a flower, like a smile or a song.

Translated by Robert St.Clair

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Covid, Crisis, and the Materialist Critique of Value

Nick Nesbitt

Abstract: This essay argues that to comprehend the Covid pandemic not as a *cause* of the current crisis, but instead as a secondary *effect* and form of appearance of the valorisation logic inherent to the capitalist social form--as Anselm Jappe and his co-authors rightly assert in *De virus illustribus: Crise du Coronavirus et épuisement structurel du capitalisme* (2020)--requires, beyond the suggestive but ultimately programmatic affirmations of this newest instance of *Wertkritik*, a return to the Spinozist materialism of Pierre Macherey and Louis Althusser. The essay thus proceeds from an analysis of the nature of materialist critique as Althusser and Macherey develop the practice in their various readings of Spinoza and Marx, to a discussion of certain necessary effects of the capitalist social form and the crisis of the valorisation process as they determine the unfolding pandemic.

Keywords: Spinoza, Materialism, Althusser, Macherey, Marx, COVID, Jappe

'Metus est inconstans Tristitia, orta ex ideâ rei futuræ, vel præteritæ, de cujus eventu aliquatenus dubitamus' ['Fear is inconstant Sadness arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt']. Spinoza, *Ethics* III, def. 13.

'Lapis in alicujus caput ceciderit,' writes Spinoza in his critique of inadequate, imaginary thought, free will, and teleology in the famous Appendix to Book I of the *Ethics*. A stone has indeed fallen from the sky upon the head of humanity, in the form of a global pandemic that has in mere months spread with lightning speed across the globe to infect, as I write, 41.7 million people and kill at least 1.1 million, its fitful spread continuing largely unimpeded amid confusion over the adequacy and necessity of epidemiological regulations and consequent panicked, mycological surges of libertarian narcissism.²

In the ensuing shock and panic in the face of this novel and mysterious pathogen, our capacity adequately to grasp the nature and necessary causes and effects of this global crisis has manifestly regressed in the face of overwhelming terror before the unknown. In impulsive response, with the capillary necessity of poison spreading through a body, from every corner of the globe there spring forth from the mouths of the governing class the most dumbfounding, imagined

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¹The research and work on this study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GA R) within the project (GA 19-20319S) "From Bolzano to Badiou."

²NYTimes, accessed October 21, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>.

explanations and remedies for this misfortune. Even public figures long-known to be infantile 'morons' can still shock the global community with a sudden short-circuit of their already underdeveloped faculty of reason, to argue, for example, from the evident effect of bleach to kill pathogens in a toilet bowl to conclude that it could be ingested for similar antiviral effect in humans.³ No less stunning, however, is it to witness the soundest scientific minds, their adult lives dedicated to the emendation of predictive, epidemiological reason, regress under the unrelenting onslaught of destructive impressions and affects, and to accede to infantile moments of self-satisfaction.⁴ The global sacrifice of these ministerial lambs is unrelenting: Roman Prymula, Dara Calleary, Lukas Szumowski, Phil Hogan, Dominic Cummings...

Spinoza did not simply decry the fallible inadequacy of lived experience and sensuous memory, to debunk the imaginary representations and images we create for ourselves that are the subjective dimension of ideology. In response and above all, Spinoza urged us to develop the material powers of the intellect to know and grasp the eternal necessity of adequately comprehended causes in their univocal coherence under the order of nature. In the crisis and chaos that is our immediate global subjection to Covid, in the preparatory pandemic of fakenews and disinformation that has dissolved norms of scientific reason in the muck of lies, fantasies, and misinformation, when fact-checking the daily stream of deceptions, denigrations, and duplicities becomes an exercise in futility, in the mire of degenerative ruination, Santayana's sentiment, the pious counsel to consult the annals of history to gain a bearing on the present, grows evermore inadequate.

How many times have we seen in editorials, books, blogs, and all the rest of the symbolic cacophony that is contemporary life, comparisons between Trump and the rise of fascism, comparisons of the new and old populism, condemnation of the smallest signs of repetition of past descent into barbarity, signs that we read assiduously in the daily feed of our twitter accounts like the grounds of coffee or the entrails of beasts that might point toward the imminent demise of the postwar order?

When, in his Appendix to Book I the *Ethics*, Spinoza critiques the inadequacy of imagistic, imaginary modes of thought, he offers a general prescription for the emendation of the intellect, an itinerary for the path

³Washington Post, October 4, 2017, 'Rex Tillerson sure made it sound like he called Trump a "moron."' <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/04/rex-tillerson-might-as-well-have-just-admitted-he-called-trump-a-moron/>, accessed October 21, 2020. 'Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump suggests injecting disinfectant as treatment.' BBC News, 24 April, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>, accessed October 21, 2020.

⁴ Seznam Zprávy, 'Ve stínu "U Ria". Prymula s Faltýnkem se sešli v doupěti mocných' ['In the shadow of "U Ria." Prymula and Faltýnek met in the lair of the powerful']. Accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ve-stinu-u-ria-primula-s-faltynkem-se-sesli-v-doupeti-mocnych-125768>.

of thought that leads from its utter debasement and subjection to the sensory images that flood our daily perception, from our mediated world of online phantasms, toward the adequate knowledge of eternal ideas. In a word, in this famous scholium, he condenses his radical prescription for an ethical orientation that culminates in the beatitude of a fully adequate intuitive knowledge of the absolute.

The single overarching prescription he offers us to orient our thought away from the hallucinatory meanderings of the imaginary, toward an apodictic knowledge of the necessity of a universal causal order is this: that we strive and learn to reason not from effects to their (imaginary) causes, but from the true necessity of causes to the effects they engender. 'Nature has no fixed goal,' Spinoza writes, 'and all final causes are but figments of human imagination. [Rather,] all things in Nature proceed from eternal necessity and with supreme perfection' (E I, App.). Most obviously, that we seek to reason not from the unpleasant subjective feeling a mask may give us only then to attribute its cause to the malicious intent of a sovereign Big Other, but from the essential nature of masks, scientifically understood, to their necessary epidemiological effects in a pandemic. The point is familiar, and tragically requires daily reiteration in op-eds across the globe. I wish to argue in what follows, however, for the nature and necessity of a materialist critique that attends not simply to the epidemiological nature of the virus, but to the contradictions of the capitalist social form, laid bare by the crisis, a materialist critique that finds its most powerful resources in the Spinozist ontology and ethics of Marx, Althusser, and Macherey, a Spinozist critique of the essential nature of the capitalist social form in the time of Covid.

The human intellect is capable of infinitely greater and more adequate reasoning than the tragic farces of imaginary thinking that surround us still today at every turn. Spinoza shows that we can come to know the causal order of nature, from the laws of motion universally governing physical bodies to the necessary structural causality of our human social order, when we reason from causes to their necessary effects, rather than the inverse. This, for example, is how Marx proceeded when he stepped back from the political engagement of the 1840s to construct his critique of political economy in the form of the massive, unfinished project that we know as *Capital*. Refusing to remain subject to the illusory forms of appearance of our world, to the world of commodities in which everything, absolutely everything has its price, in which profit is king and time is money, Marx instead immersed himself for the remaining decades of his life in the analysis and critique of capitalism as the determinant structure of global modernity.

In fact, the closest parallel to Marx's methodology in the opening chapters of *Capital*, is in fact Spinoza; specifically, Spinoza's famous deployment in the *Ethics* of the Euclidean synthetic, 'geometric' method

for the apodictic demonstration of propositions.⁵ Pierre Macherey has argued decisively that Spinoza's rejection of the Cartesian analytical method of philosophical argument in favour of the synthetic method he adopted from Euclid, virtually alone in the philosophical tradition, allows Spinoza to 'maximally clarify the presentation of his ideas and facilitate their assimilation'. Even more crucially, however, Spinoza argued against Descartes that the synthetic method with its axioms, definitions, propositions, demonstrations, and scholia is no mere heuristic method for the secondary, formal exposition and illustration of truths previously derived in an analytic passage from the known to the unknown. Rather, for Spinoza, the synthetic method finds its superiority in organizing the movement of thought from the adequate knowledge of causes to that of their effects.⁶

In this manner, the thought-object (Spinoza's *Ethics*) does not merely *conform* to or accurately *represent* the real order of things (there is no ontological dualism between thought and extension for Spinoza as there is for Descartes, a point I will return to below), it literally *is* the real order of things, the order of things apprehended under the attribute of thought, rather than in their attribute of sensuous, material extension. Macherey notes that this form of exposition gives Spinoza's text its critical, properly ethical force in a manner precisely analogous, I would add, to the critical intent of *Capital* (Macherey 1998: 21): in this view, if adequate understanding of Spinoza's *Ethics* should necessarily prove transformative to the reader's understanding, allowing her to grasp the radical inadequacy of illusory forms of thinking (thinking, that is to say, backward from perceived effects to imaginary causes, for example in the case of miraculous causes and cures for Covid), the same can be said of *Capital*, whose attentive reader is ineluctably led to pierce the ideological illusions of, for example, 'the fetishism of the commodity,' and even more radically, also to come to grasp the *necessity* of these illusory forms of appearance in the system of capital as a whole.⁷

It is only when we can adequately grasp the conceptual categories that determine our existence as subjects of capital, Marx demonstrated,

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5 I develop this argument in greater detail in Nick Nesbitt, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Social Form: From Marx to Caribbean Critique*. Forthcoming, 2021.

6 Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza: La première partie, la nature des choses* (Paris: PUF 1998): 17.

7 On the latter point, see Jacques Bidet, *Exploring Marx's Capital* (Chicago: Haymarket 2006 [1985]), Chapter 8, 'The Theorization of the Ideological in *Capital*.' While Marx took notes on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1841, there is no evidence he read the *Ethics*, and his very few, ancillary mentions of Spinoza imply that his knowledge of that text was gleaned indirectly through Hegel's misrepresentation of Spinozist doctrine. See 'Marx's Reading of Spinoza: On the Alleged Influence of Spinoza on Marx.' *Historical Materialism* 26:4 (Dec. 2018): 35-58. On Hegel's misrepresentation of Spinozist doctrine, see Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press [1979]): 2011.

when we can adequately comprehend the structure of value and its division into use value and exchange value, the essential determination of commodity society under the wage labor relation as the source and substance of value itself, only when we have grasped these and many other categorial structures of capital in their relational necessity, can we then reason from causes to effects.

The point I wish to develop here is that a properly conceived, Spinozist materialism of the capitalist social form can offer a necessary and, ultimately, adequate theory for understanding the current global crisis, not simply as an unprecedented epidemiological disaster, but as a pandemic crisis of the capitalist social form itself. To do so, I will first examine the nature of Spinozist materialist critique as Marx, Althusser, and Macherey conceive it, to then discuss in light of this critique some of the necessary effects of the capitalist social form in the age of Covid.

Materialism in a Spinozist Way

The proper, though never fully articulated, Spinozist nature of materialist critique deployed in the writings of Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey lies, I wish to argue, immediately at hand in the texts of high 'Althusserianism' of 1965-67.⁸ In essence, this is to claim that Althusser's famous general proposition in *Reading Capital* on the subterranean Spinozism of philosophy (Spinoza's 'radical revolution was the object of a massive historical repression. [...] The history of philosophy's repressed Spinozism thus unfolded as a subterranean history') holds true for Althusserian epistemology itself, in which Spinozist thought functions as an occasionally acknowledged, but never adequately explicated theoretical foundation (RC 250).⁹ In other words, the Spinozist epistemology that avowedly underlies the various analyses of *Reading Capital*, *there is in fact no substantial distinction to be made between the 'object' of materialist analysis and that of analysis itself*.¹⁰

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8 Under this category I would include not only the published volumes *For Marx*, *Reading Capital*, *Theory of Literary Production*, and Macherey and Balibar's contributions to the Cérisy colloquium *Le centenaire du Capital*, but also the various exchanges of the 'groupe Spinoza' and related texts such as Althusser's 1966 'Sur Lévi-Strauss' (Louis Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, Tome II. François Matheron, ed. Stock/IMEC, 199). On the 'Groupe Spinoza,' Alain Badiou has reflected: 'The Groupe Spinoza was a group composed by Althusser, with some friends of Althusser, all reading *Capital* practically, engaged in the project to write a sort of synthesis of our epistemological convictions. The idea was to produce a fundamental book concerning theory: concerning what theory is, what constitutes an epistemological rupture and so on; to propose something like an educational book concerning all these sorts of themes. All that was destroyed by 1968 and, after that, by very strong political differences and struggles' (Alain Badiou, 'The Althusserian Definition of "Theory,"' in *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today*. Nick Nesbitt, ed. Durham: Duke University Press 2017: 25).

9 I develop this critique of Althusser's Spinozist materialism more fully in 'What is Materialist Analysis?', op. cit.

10 As Althusser famously wrote in the 1972 *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 'If we were never structuralists, we can now explain why: [...] we were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion:

The problem of an object that materialist analysis would *represent* is a false problem, once one accepts instead that substance is indivisible, that the infinite attributes constitute, immediately, the expression of substance and its infinite modes as the determinations of those attributes, and that, above all, the order of ideas is *one and the same thing* as the order of things [*ordo, et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum*] (*E* IIP7). To conceive of materialist analysis in terms of a substantial distinction between analysis and its object is, from a Spinozist perspective, inadmissible; it is to reintroduce precisely the Cartesian dualism of substances (between extension and the intellect) that Spinoza systematically critiques.

Judging by his powerful (private) critiques of Althusser's presentation of the concept of structural causality in the first edition of *Reading Capital*, Macherey had developed a reading of Spinoza even more rigorous and systematic than Althusser's by 1965 at the latest (Montag 2013, ch. 5). It is only in his writings since *Hegel or Spinoza*, however, that Macherey has fully explicated the interpretation of Spinoza that can retrospectively be said to determine the epistemology of the Althusserian texts of 1965-67. In *Hegel or Spinoza*, and above all in the second volume of his explication of the *Ethics*, Macherey reads Spinoza's demonstration of the identity of the formal structure or order of the attributes to constitute the singular essence of a substantialist materialism. Proper understanding of the nature of the Spinozist attributes, and their relation to Substance, Macherey shows, is the key to any adequate construction of a truly materialist, positive dialectical mode of critique.¹¹

Rejecting point by point the Hegelian misreading of Spinoza in *Hegel or Spinoza*, Macherey affirms that, for Spinoza, the relation of the (infinite) attributes of substance:

1. Cannot consist in a linear and countable or ordinal sequence (i.e., the attribute of thought, plus the attribute of extensions, plus all the other infinite attributes). 'The unity of substance is

we were Spinozists.' (Cited at Morfino 2). Vittorio Morfino points to the decisive influence Spinoza brought to bear on Althusser's 1965 reading of *Capital*: 'The reference to Spinoza [...] is fundamental with respect to three decisive questions in the Althusserian re-reading of Marxism: the process of knowledge, structural causality, and ideology.' Vittorio Morfino *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser*. Haymarket 2015: 2-3.

¹¹ 'La clé du nouveau raisonnement que Spinoza introduit dans la philosophie,' Macherey writes in *Hegel ou Spinoza*, c'est la thèse de l'identité des attributs dans la substance dans laquelle ils sont unifiés tout en restant réellement distincts. [...] il n'y a pas lieu de poser [as does Hegel] une identité entre deux, trois, quatre... une infinité de séries ou d'attributs, dont l'ordre et la connexion seraient reconnus comme concordants. Il faut comprendre, ce qui est impossible si on s'en tient au point de vue de l'imagination, que c'est *un seul et même ordre, une seule et même connexion*, qui s'effectue dans tous les attributs, et les constitue identiquement dans leur être : la substance n'est justement rien d'autre que cette nécessité unique qui s'exprime à la fois dans une infinité de formes.' (Macherey 1979: 152-153).

thus not an arithmetic unity [...], an empty form of the One. [...] It is this infinitely diverse reality that comprises all its attributes and that expresses itself in their infinity. [...] One can no more count substance than one can count its attributes, at least if one renounces the point of view of imagination., [...] To say that there is a single substance is to speak from the imagination that can only consider the absolute negatively, from nothingness, that is, from the part of the possible, which it envelops (Macherey 2011: 99, 104).

2. That the attributes do not coexist in ordinal relation implies in turn that they do not consist of elements defining one another in negative relation. 'If all the attributes together belong to substance, constituting its being (*E* IP10S), they do not coexist within it as parts that would adjust to each other to finally compose the total system. If this were so, the attributes would define themselves in relation to each other through their reciprocal lack (2011: 100).

3. This further implies that substance itself cannot be divided up into its various (infinite) attributes, but is instead indivisible. 'To think the infinite, whether it be in the attribute (in a kind) or in substance (absolutely), is to exclude any notion of divisibility; substance is entirely complete in each of its attributes (because it is identical to them), just as, moreover, all extension is in each drop of water or all thought is in each idea. [...] The infinite is not a number; this is why it evades all division. Indivisible substance is not the sum of all its attributes' (2011: 100).

4. From these propositions Macherey then concludes that the relation of the attributes is one of unitary (rather than comparative, negative) identity: 'As an attribute of substance, thought is *identical* to everything and therefore has nothing above it, but the sequence through which it is realized poses, at the same time, its absolute equality with all other forms in which substance is also expressed, and these are infinite in number' (2011: 74).

5. The so-called 'parallelism' of the attributes (a term that Spinoza never uses in any of his writings, and which Macherey attributes to Leibniz), then, is quite simply 'inadmissible.' This must be the case, if one reads the wording of proposition II7 attentively: in the statement *Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum*, the order and connection of ideas is not said by Spinoza to be the same as the order of physical *bodies in extension* (the other attribute to which humans have access), but to that of *things* [*rerum*], of all things without distinction, including, of course, ideas themselves; 'the word *things* [*res*] absolutely does not, in a

restrictive way, designate the modes of the attribute of extension, but the modes of all the attributes, whatever they are, *including thought itself*. [...] *This is one and the same order, one and the same connection*' (2011: 106, emphasis in original).

Macherey goes on, in his subsequent explication of book II of *Ethics* to further develop this critique of the notion of 'parallelism' in distinction to the more adequate understanding of the relation of the order of the attributes as an identity (1997: 71-81).¹² Macherey first repeats his assertion from *Hegel or Spinoza* summarized above to the effect that *E IIP7* must refer to the *identity* of the order of ideas and the order of things, further specifying this assertion, based first on grammatical, and then apodictic determinations.

Grammatically, in the phrase *Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum*, the masculine/neutral adjective *idem* cannot be argued to apply to the feminine *connexio*. The phrase 'is the same as' [*idem est ac*] therefore cannot be said to apply to a ('parallel') relation *between* two 'independent sets [*ensembles*],' but instead qualifies *a single order as identical to itself*. From this, Macherey concludes that the proper translation of Spinoza's proposition should be 'The order and connection of ideas *is the same thing as* the order and connection of things' (1997: 71, all translations mine).

This assertion finds its immediate confirmation in the demonstration of proposition 7, which points to its axiomatic basis in the initial axiom 4 of *de Deo*, the meaning of which is eminently clear: ideas are subject to a single, identical order that holds for all things (1997: 72). In sum, Macherey concludes,

Proposition 7 of *de Mente* does not affirm the extrinsic identity between two systems of order and connection facing each other, one of which would be the order of ideas and the other that of things bestowing on these ideas their objects, these things being themselves identified unilaterally as bodies. Instead, Proposition 7 proposes that the order and connection inheres in its proper, intrinsic constitution to that to which all things in general are governed [*soumises*], and from which nothing distinguishes it. (1997: 73)

For Spinoza, in Macherey's reading, the order of causality of ideas is literally 'the same thing' as the order and causality of all things, including ideas; there is, in other words, only one order and causality of things,

¹² I insist on this development in Macherey's 1997 volume in a volume unavailable as of this writing in English translation not only because it constitutes the most developed explication of Macherey's substantialist, Spinozist materialism, but also because the 400—plus pages of this crucial second volume of his explication are currently out of print even in the French original.

which can be apprehended through an infinite number of attributes (though humans only have access to two, thought and extension).¹³ To argue otherwise in the sense of a 'parallelism', Macherey insists, would be to reinstate a Cartesian dualism of the attributes of thought and extension: 'The "parallelist" reading of proposition 7 reinscribes the Spinozist doctrine in a dualist perspective, explaining all of nature through the relation of extended substance and thought substance.'¹⁴

On Storytelling and the Nature of Materialism

In contrast to Macherey's minute attention to the letter of Spinoza's text, Althusser's writings offer little concrete analysis of Spinoza's text, but instead propose a number of laconic, even enigmatic, one-liner definitions of materialism. It is thus possible to orchestrate in counterpoint Macherey's attention to the letter of Spinoza's text with the suggestive promise of Althusser's allusive materialism. It would take a volume in itself to address Althusser's various reiterations and returns to the related problems of Historical and Dialectical materialism, of the materialist turns in Marx's philosophy ('On the Young Marx'), of the relation of materials of production to the capitalist mode of production (*Reading Capital* 318-335), and the like. The 'aleatory materialism' of Althusser's final period poses similarly complex problems of interpretation beyond the scope of this essay, which we might sum up in saying that in turning to Lucretius and Democritus in his now-famous 1982 essay, Althusser distances himself on crucial points from the Spinozist materialism with which we are here concerned, and even more decisively from Macherey's arguably more rigorous, literal readings of the Spinozist text since 1979.¹⁵

¹³ Jason Read, 'The Order and Connection of Ideas: Theoretical Practice in Macherey's Turn to Spinoza,' *Rethinking Marxism*, 19:4, 500-520 (2007) 511. The present analysis in general draws upon Read's limpid analysis of Althusser's and Macherey's related readings of Spinoza, to interrogate in its light the epistemological object and method of a Spinozist materialism.

¹⁴ 'For this [parallelist] reading to be possible, would require that, in the enunciation of the proposition, not only would the neutral singular *idem* [thing] have to be replaced by the masculine plural *idem sunt*, but also that the term *corporum* [bodies] be implicitly substituted for the term *rerum*' (1997: 72). Spinoza's explication of this proposition unequivocally corresponds to Macherey's reading: 'And so, whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of Extension or under the attribute of Thought or under any other attribute, we find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes—that is, the same things following one another' *E IIP7S Cf.* Macherey 2011: 106; Read 507-8.

¹⁵ One striking example of this incongruity is Althusser's assertion in 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982) that 'for Spinoza, the object of philosophy is the void.' This is not simply a 'paradoxical thesis,' as Althusser observes, it is quite simply antithetical to Spinoza's explicit and extensive critique of the concept of the void in Book I of the *Ethics*. The free-floating associations of Althusser's argument culminate weakly in the metaphorical (rather than ontological) conclusion that Spinoza asserted '*the void that is philosophy itself*' (Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*. New York: Verso, 2006: 178, italics in original). In fact, Macherey shows that Spinoza, reaffirming Descartes' critique, decisively rejects the atomism of the Ancients as fully inadequate, imaginary representation, to explicitly affirm instead that "'matter is everywhere the same'" [*materia ubique eadem est*] in its substantial principle' (Macherey, Pierre, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza. La première partie: La nature des choses*. Paris: PUF, 1998: 124). 'Corporeal

Leaving aside the circularity of the definition of Althusser offers in Lecture III of *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (the ‘materialist character’ of science is characterized, as to its object, by ‘an external object with a material existence’) along with other definitions that merely equate materialism with an adequate scientific practice,¹⁶ in *The Future Lasts Forever*, Althusser offers richly enigmatic definition of materialism: “‘Not to indulge in storytelling’ still remains for me the one and only definition of materialism.”¹⁷ Though Althusser makes no mention of Spinoza in this passage, ‘to resort to mere storytelling’ neatly encapsulates the principal assertion of Spinoza’s Appendix to *Ethics I*: that reasoning inadequately from effects to causes is the basis of imaginary, ideological thinking. Materialism, in contrast, would thus implicitly seek always to argue from the adequate understanding of causes to the effects they produce.

In his 1985 text *L’Unique tradition matérialiste*, Althusser proposes another enigmatic yet even more auspicious definition of materialism: ‘Nominalism is not the royal road to materialism but *the only possible materialism*.’¹⁸ Here again, it lies far beyond the scope of this article to sort Althusser’s flat assertion that nominalism is ‘the only possible materialism’ from the innumerable accreted historical senses of nominalism, from the diverse critiques of universals and abstract objects as well as corresponding assertions of the reality of particular objects and of concrete objects. Instead, I shall merely summarize the Spinozist construct Althusser’s assertion is meant to encapsulate.

substance,’ Spinoza writes unambiguously, ‘can be conceived only as infinite, one, and indivisible’ (41). Macherey consequently reads these passages in Proposition 15 of Book I and its Scholium as ‘the affirmation of a plenitude [of substance] leaving no place for void, absence, or negativity. [...] Substance is thought reality in the intense intimacy of its self-relation [...] such that nothing else, not even nothingness [...] can disturb its infinite positivity. [...] To conceive of extension as constituted of distinct parts is to deny its infinity.’ In contrast to the Ancients’ imaginary depiction of atoms in a void, ‘only the intellect,’ Macherey concludes, ‘is apt [*en mesure*] to understand that the materiality of extended substance is given at once as an indivisible totality’ (Macherey 1998: 128, 129). Althusser’s related, imagistic redeployment of the thesis of the parallelism of the attributes in ‘Materialism of the Encounter’—which are claimed by Althusser ‘to fall in the empty space of their determination’ (177)—repeats the philosophical commonplace of so-called ‘parallelism’ that Macherey, as I have argued above, subjects to such extensive and compelling critique in both *Hegel or Spinoza* (1979, ch. 3) and his analysis of Proposition 7 of Book II of the *Ethics* (Macherey 1997).

16 Althusser, Louis, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*. New York: Verso 1990 [1974], 135. In *Reading Capital*, following Lenin, Althusser affirms that ‘in the expression ‘historical materialism’, ‘materialism’ means no more than science, and the expression is strictly synonymous with that of ‘science of history’ (*Reading Capital* 360). Althusser will reiterate this definition, for example in “Lenin and Philosophy”: ‘Historical materialism thus means: science of history,’ and again, in modified form, in “Lenin Before Hegel,” where he refers to ‘the materialist thesis of the material existence and of the objectivity of scientific knowledge,’ Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001: 23, 83.

17 *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*. Richard Veasey trans. New York: The New Press 1993: 221.

18 Althusser, Louis, ‘The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza,’ in *The New Spinoza*, Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997: 10.

In the third section of *L’Unique tradition matérialiste* in which this definition of materialism appears, Althusser—in the course of a broad reflection on the centrality of Spinoza to his thinking—turns to his interpretation of Spinoza’s third genre [*genus*] of knowledge, the ‘intuitive science’ [*scientiam intiutivam*]’ that Spinoza characterizes as ‘the adequate knowledge of the essence of things’ [*adaequatam cognitionem essentiae rerum*] (*E* IIP40S2). In Althusser’s usage in this passage, the term ‘nominalisms’ (in the plural) is adopted to refer precisely to such singular essences of things, things comprehended as ‘singularities.’ Such singularities are to be distinguished from Spinoza’s second genre of mere common or abstract universal notions [*notiones communes*] (such as motion and rest taken as universal characteristics of all bodies in extension); these are explicitly, for Althusser, ‘generic and not “general” constants.’

In Althusser’s reading, Spinoza’s invention of an adequate materialist (‘nominalist’) knowledge is thus held to encompass his discovery of ‘generic constants or invariants [...] which arise in the existence of singular “cases.”’ Crucially, such constants are to be distinguished from the universal generality of ‘laws,’ (which would fall under Spinoza’s second genre of knowledge); equally, it is their genericity as constants of any singular case that allows for what Althusser revealingly calls in clinical terms their ‘treatment,’ as distinct from any empirical or experimental verification (8).¹⁹ Here, the example of psychoanalysis is patent, in which the essential nature of the psychic apparatus as Freud and Lacan reproduced it in thought (to name only these two) form a second genre of common notions, categories common to all human psychic phenomena, to which the singularity of any given case must construct the singularity of a given treatment.

If a *law* would constitute an abstract or general universal, the *constant* arising in a given instance (a symptom in the analysand or patient for example) allows for the adequate analysis and treatment of that case in its ‘nominalist’ singularity: no universal treatment is proper for the singularity of every case, yet the analyst must construct an adequate knowledge of its causes and not be misled by mere surface impressions (whether the manifest content of the dream, the visibility of bodily symptoms, or, for Marx, the mere forms of appearance of capital) to be inadequately attributed to imaginary causes. Such attention to *constants*, moreover, holds in Althusser’s view for any singular being, for example a people (the Jews, in Spinoza’s analysis in *TTP*) or what Althusser calls a ‘social singularity’ (the critique of capital in Marx, or political revolution for Lenin) (8).

19The constants diagnosed in any singularity ‘do not constitute the object of a will to *verification* in an abstract renewable experimental *dispositive*, as in physics or chemistry, but whose repetitive insistence permits us to mark the form of singularity in presence and, therefore, its treatment’ (8).

Following this elaboration, along with a brief excursus on the *TTP* and Spinoza's 'philosophical strategy' of 'taking over the chief stronghold of the adversary' (10), Althusser then concludes his presentation with the affirmation of Spinoza's materialist 'nominalism' cited above. This takes the form of a critique of transcendentals: 'Without ever sketching a transcendental genesis of meaning, truth, or the conditions of possibility of every truth, [... Spinoza] established himself within the factuality of a simple claim: "We have a true idea"' (10-11). The 'nominalist' materialist thus passes beyond the universal generality of common notions, of transcendental guarantees (such as Lévi-Strauss' kinship order or discourse in Gilles Deleuze's problematic definition of structuralism) to articulate instead the generic necessity of any singular essence.²⁰

This final step then brings Althusser to define, in eminently clear and distinct terms, the fundamental Spinozist proposition that should be seen retrospectively to constitute the essential order of any adequate materialist critique: 'This *factual nominalism* was rediscovered—and with what genius!—in the famous distinction [...] between the *ideatum* and the *idea*, between the thing and its concept, between the dog that barks and the concept of the dog, which does not bark, between the circle that is round, and the idea of the circle, which is not round, and so on' (11).

What Althusser names his 'nominalist' materialism in his late, 1985 text might indeed be more properly termed an *axiomatic, substantialist materialism*. For the proposition that the order of ideas and of things is one and the same thing is indeed an axiomatic proposition: its ground lies not in the apodictic, synthetic demonstration of proposition VII in *Ethics* Book II, but instead in the very axiomatic foundation of Spinoza's entire system. In fact, the famous proposition VII of Book II explicitly refers the reader back to *E I*, Axiom 4, and, together, Axioms 4, 5, and 6 of Book I constitute, Macherey demonstrates, the fundamental epistemological order of an inherent, necessary identity between the two orders or attributes of thought and extension.

While axioms 3-5 of Book I affirm the necessary structure of causality under both the attributes of extension and the intellect, it is Axiom 6 that draws these together to affirm that the true idea 'must be in conformity with its ideat' [*debet cum suo ideato convenire*] (*E I*Ax6). Macherey's interpretation of this key axiom bears citing in whole, as it is this statement that arguably informs the entire epistemological apparatus of Althusser's and Macherey's thought:

This axiom [6] takes up in a new perspective the general teaching [*enseignement*] from the initial definitions and axioms [of Book I]: as the thing is, so it is conceived, as well as the inverse: as the thing is conceived, in so far as this is a true knowledge, so it is, necessarily.

20 On Althusser and Macherey's critique of Deleuze's famous text, see Montag 2013: 96-100.

For every idea in the intellect, in so far as it is true, that is to say, [...] well-formed—since all ideas are true in the intellect that understands them, and at the same moment relates them to the ideate to which they are in a relation of conformity—there necessarily corresponds a content given in reality. (1998: 61, all translations mine)

This Spinozist monism thus founds for Macherey, and implicitly for Althusser as well, a substance-based materialism, in which the 'real'—an indeterminate, reflexively deployed category in Althusser's contribution to *Reading Capital* (41)—stands plainly revealed in Macherey's explication as neither mere sensuous materiality (empiricist materialism) nor transcendently finite totality (idealism); the real is to be understood as substance itself, the infinite dynamic of the *causa sui* as 'the process within which substance determines itself through the "essences" that constitute it' (2012: 91).²¹ This substance-based materialism affirms that

Thought reality and extended reality coincide in the absolute being of substance, where they are only distinguished by the intellect. [...] There is just as much materiality, no more nor less, in reality envisaged from the perspective [*angle*] of the mental as when envisaged from the perspective of the bodily. [...] Mental reality is a reality unto itself [*une réalité à part entière*], whose elements, ideas, are materially existing things, no less consistent, in their own order, than those that materially compose extended nature. (Macherey 1997: 5)

Covid, Crisis, and the Renewal of Materialist Critique

A materialist critique of the Covid pandemic would, following Althusser and Macherey's redeployments of Spinoza, necessarily seek to demonstrate the essential causes of the current crisis, refusing, in other words, to view the biological fact of the appearance of this novel virus as its cause, but rather to grasp the virus as *effect* (most obviously, as an effect of the development of transnational capitalist markets and modes of transport that were its vector of transmission, and the destruction of the ecosphere that seems to have profoundly determined the initial appearance of the virus). More particularly, however, Coronavirus must arguably be thought as a determinate, historical phenomenon comprehensible in light of the laws of the tendencies of the capitalist social form and above all, its essential compulsion to perpetuate the ongoing valorisation of value.

In this vein, one of the most suggestive recent books on the Covid crisis, *De virus illustribus: Crise du coronavirus et épuisement structurel*

21 Were this identity of the real with substance not sufficiently clear, Macherey even glosses in passing in *Hegel or Spinoza*—again without even bothering to draw attention to what should be perfectly obvious from a properly Spinozist perspective—the equivalence of the 'real' with substance itself: Spinoza 'eliminates from his conception of the real, from substance, any idea of a hierarchical subordination of elements' (2011: 74).

du capitalisme, argues precisely that the Coronavirus must not be understood as the cause of the crisis, but constitutes rather a powerful and destructive *effect* of the more general, ongoing crisis of the value form.²² The book develops the critique of the value form familiar from the writings of Robert Kurz and the Krisis *Wertkritik* group (of which Jappe is one of the central figures).²³ Its central thesis is that Covid has accelerated the crisis of the valorisation process that Kurz and the *Wertkritik* school have argued has gripped global capitalism since the 1970s. This is the case, they argue, in so far as the tendential elimination of living labor from the production process has forced the system, in order to stave off systemic collapse, to exponentially increase its dependence upon the generation of fictive capital, the nature of which is a monetary speculation on the potential (perpetually postponed) future production of surplus value. The authors of *De virus illustribus* restate this hypothesis as such, without rehearsing its demonstration via the *Wertkritik* reading of *Capital*. The general, ongoing crisis of value, they summarize in this vein, is a consequence of 'the reduction of abstract labour due to the general augmentation of productivity [since the 1970s....] As a result of these increased levels of productivity, the immediate production process as a source of the production of [surplus] value dries up. This constitutes the internal limit of capital' (23).

The central claim of the book, itself a fundamentally Spinozist point, is that the virus is not a cause, but an accelerator of this preexistent crisis:

The Sars-Covid-2 virus is the trigger, but not the cause of the aggravation of the ongoing structural and global crisis, one fundamentally determined by the internal contradiction [of the valorisation process]. As an expression of the internal contradictions accrued by the contemporary regime of accumulation, in its structural fixation upon the anticipation of the future production of surplus value via the generalization of debt, the sanitary crisis is the expression and vector of a crisis already in process, the course of which it only accelerates. (43)

This is to deny that the Covid pandemic constitutes a biological crisis

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22 Jappe, Anselm, Sandrine Aumercier, Clément Homès, Gabriel Zacarias, *De virus illustribus: Crise du coronavirus et épuisement structurel du capitalisme*. (Éditions Crise et Critique, 2020). All further translations mine.

23 See Larsen et al. eds., *Marxism and the Critique of Value* (MCM' 2014). See also Robert Kurz, Anselm Jappe (Preface), *La substance du Capital* (Paris: Collection Versus 2019); Kurz, *Vies et mort du capitalisme* (Paris: Lignes, 2011); Anselm Jappe, "Kurz: A Journey into Capitalism's Heart of Darkness," *Historical Materialism* 22, nos. 3–4 (2014): 395–407; Frank Engster, "Krisis, What's Crisis?" (review of Larsen et al., *Marxism and the Critique of Value*), *Radical Philosophy* 195 (January/February 2016): 48–51; Norbert Trenkle and Ernst Lohoff, *La grande dévalorisation: Pourquoi la spéculation et la dette de l'état ne sont pas les causes de la crise* (Ed. Post 2014); Anselm Jappe, *Crédit à mort* (Paris: Lignes, 2011).

exterior to the valorisation process and capitalism more generally, an exogenic 'external shock to a sound Economy', but rather reduces epidemiological phenomena to the status of effects internal to the valorisation process (35). Covid and the crisis make terrifyingly explicit the trajectories of capital and the exponential increase in flows of commodities, including, above all, the intensified flows of infected humans commoditized as subjects of air and other forms of rapid international travel networks that rapidly spread the pandemic to every corner of the globe (45).

A Spinozist, Althusserian critique of the ideology of Covid that would develop the suggestive critique of this recent book would require submitting to ruthless critique the stories we continue to tell ourselves about the nature of this pandemic, in which the media 'hammer home incessantly the panorama of a previously healthy global economy prior to Covid-19 as a mechanism of projection, the dominant apologetic ideology seeking above all to absolve the insane advance of the economy and to prevent, in this situation, any remobilisation of a critique of the system' (36).

Beyond this general critique of the ideology of Covid-19 as a natural and biological, rather than economically determined crisis, the central argument of *De virus illustribus* points to the debilitating contradictions and enfeeblement of the state, understood in its intimate dependency upon the valorisation process. In this view, the state is no mere independent outgrowth of civil society, but is by its very nature vitally dependent upon the ongoing production of surplus value (as the source of its lifeblood revenue via taxation): The state's

conditions of existence and its social capacities are utterly dependent upon the bleeding of value in the form of the taxes it draws from the economic sphere. Without this fiscal input, without an expenditure of the future production of value (in the form of state debt [as quantitative easing]), no collective action is possible. [...] The state form of collective action under capitalism is thus necessarily dependent upon the movement of valorisation. (71)

The obverse of the state's dependency upon the continuation of the valorisation process is the central role it plays in the reproduction of the valorisation process, acting in the long-term interests of capital to oversee and regulate the social reproduction process, the elements of which remain in dynamic antagonism with the logic of competition and the compulsion to realize increases in the production of relative surplus value. Here, the state operates in the interest not of the citizenry but of an 'ideal collective capitalist,' to assure the long-term interests of the system as well as the integration and subordination of the working and subaltern classes to the ongoing dynamics of primitive accumulation,

market dependency, and the primacy of the production of surplus value (71). The state thus serves to assure the ongoing function of valorisation, the accumulation of surplus value, via its deployment and oversight of the juridical, police, military, education, infrastructure, and above all, in the case at hand, health-care systems as the 'external cadre to the valorisation of capital' (72).

The functioning of this *partage de rôles*, between the competitive dynamic of the market and the reproduction of human life, is wrought by various contradictions. This is most obviously the case in the form of the contradiction between the historicity of human needs and the ongoing neoliberal demand for privatization. In the contemporary conjuncture, however, another contradiction has come to the fore, in the form of a contradiction between the survival of the state and the survival of its population. The manifest form of appearance this contradiction repeatedly takes in the time of Covid is the ever-renewed oscillation between the falsely polarized priorities of saving people's lives (via the shutting down of economic activity) versus saving the economy, whatever the human 'collateral damage' this may incur. This is a false polarization, the authors argue, since it speciously separates what is a real contradiction internal to the valorisation process itself (i.e., capital must valorise value both through ongoing increases in absolute and relative surplus value, but also in the longer term via the viable reproduction of living labor, the unique source of surplus value).

Ultimately, the authors of *De virus illustribus* argue that this dynamic contradiction remains subject in the last instance to the predominant social compulsion of the valorisation of value, and humanity can thus expect the state always to opt, in the last instance, to perpetuate its own capitalist existence. This may be the case, I would add in light of the Spinozist critique, insofar as the state, like any other thing (though we must, with Spinoza, avoid the risk of anthropomorphic images), necessarily remains determined by the nature of its conatus, such that its human population risks being served up as the dwindling fuel thrown upon the pyre of valorisation. This contradictory process, while perhaps initially leading to the sacrifice of millions and the perpetuation of the state on life support, can only, according to the logic of *Wertkritik*, lead in consequence to the collapse of the state itself, as the source of its revenue, the taxation of surplus value, dwindles with entombment of living labor (83).

Critique and the Positive Dialectic of Capital

The contemporary degeneration of the powers of reason in the age of Covid demand something more, however, than the topical critique of such effects as those noted by the authors of *De virus illustribus*. Ultimately, for all the force of their insights into the contemporary crisis, the repeated assertion of the necessity of collapse, in the absence of any

concrete demonstration of the laws of the tendencies of the capitalist social form and their singular iterations in the contemporary conjuncture, such claims remain empty assertions, ultimately convincing, perhaps, only to those already convinced of the *Wertkritik* 'value-dissociation' prognosis of imminent collapse. A Spinozist demonstration of necessity cannot-- in distinction to the readiness of Kurz and his followers to repeatedly announce the impending downfall of the capitalist social form and as Macherey argues in his discussion of the *EI* appendix--foretell future events in their subjection to the infinite determinations governing phenomena. Instead, such a critique can hope to adequately grasp the laws governing all natural phenomena.

I have dwelled at length on Macherey's demonstration on the nature of Spinozist materialism precisely because of the promise it continues to hold not simply for a general emendation of our general collective intellect, but even more in the conviction that it is precisely a renewed, Spinozist reading of Marx's *Capital* as what Macherey calls a positive dialectic' that continues to provide the most adequate means to grasping the essential nature of the contemporary conjuncture. As he writes of Spinoza, it is clear that for Macherey himself, theory cannot stand on its own as an autonomous and general protocol, but must instead follow in the wake of a determinate materialist analysis such as that he initially produces on Marx's *Capital*.²⁴ Let me briefly indicate just three of these possible paths for reading *Capital* in a Spinozist way:

1) In his 1965 contribution to *Reading Capital*, Macherey already discerns in *Capital* what he will subsequently, in *Hegel or Spinoza*, name a 'positive [Spinozist] dialectic.' In this long-overlooked yet insightful treatment of Marx's initial exposition of his concepts, Macherey argues that the movement of Marx's exposition is governed by a number of logical 'intermediaries' that allow for a rigorous, apodictic demonstration of the initial characteristics of the value-form, a demonstration that develops *synthetically* rather than via dialectical *aufhebung*.²⁵

In particular, Macherey argues for the fundamental heterogeneity of concepts such as wealth, use-value, and value, a heterogeneity that itself constitutes 'one of the fundamental conditions of scientific rigor' (RC 188). The relations between what Marx calls the various 'factors' of the commodity and the movement of Marx's exposition occasion no procedure of dialectical *aufhebung*, Macherey argues, but Marx's demonstration instead proceeds in a series of synthetic 'ruptures' or leaps from one order to the next following the analytical exhaustion of each concept.

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²⁴ Pierre Macherey, 'On the Process of Exposition of Capital' in *Reading Capital* 175-213; see also Nick Nesbitt, 'Value as Symptom,' in Nesbitt ed., 2017: 243-249.

²⁵ Macherey returns to Marx, via a critique of Foucault, in his recent book *Le sujet des normes* (Editions Amsterdam 2014).

It is only in 1979 that Macherey will subsequently explicitly theorize this dialectic without negation²⁶ in the closing pages of *Hegel or Spinoza*. Macherey there identifies in Spinoza a dialectic without subject, teleology, or negation. This invocation of a positive, Spinozist dialectic puts in its place the logical subject (of free will, intentionality, and of all the rampant psychologistic, individualistic explanations of unfolding of the pandemic) along with its ontological function to ground all true propositions: 'What Spinoza refuses to think is the dialectic in a subject. [Spinoza] poses the problem of a dialectic of substance, that is, a materialist dialectic that does not presuppose its completion in its initial conditions through the means of a necessarily ideal teleology' (2011: 170). In this manner, the principle of contradiction and its grounding in the subject remains strictly limited by Spinoza to existences and not essences. As such, Macherey concludes, Spinoza's 'theory of the subject' pertains above all to the constitution of bodies in extension (175). This limitation, moreover, holds for all bodies as such, not merely the human body that constitutes Spinoza's privileged example, but, for example, the body of the state and of the capitalist social form more generally.

A Spinozist limitation of the dialectic to existences can therefore serve to ground a materialist analysis of the (actually existing) body of the capitalist social form in the conjuncture of Covid, an analysis that starkly contrasts with all Hegelian idealism (*Capital* is no mere reorientation of the Hegelian dialectic placed 'on its feet'), an analysis in which contradiction (between the state and the market, between population and the demands of valorisation) is strictly limited to the phenomenal features of the social forms constituting the body of capital in its existence (in the form of actual contradictions between given forces and means of production such as the struggle over the working day). At the same time, the *essential* nature of this social form will be adequately

.....
26 It should be recalled that in French usage, the notion of *dialectic* refers quite generally to 'the set of means deployed in discussion to demonstrate or refute' (Robert) prior to its more specific indication of the negation of contradiction as in Aristotle, Hegel, or Adorno. We have become so accustomed to conceiving the 'dialectic' as the Hegelian metaphysics of contradiction and sublation, as the negation of the negation, and/or Marx's materialist inversion of this antinomy-based logic (these for example are the only two definitions offered by the Duden Wörterbuch), that it is often forgotten that the principal meaning in English of 'dialectic,' according to the OED, is simply 'logical argument' and in French (from which the English derives), 'the art of reasoning in general', while in German the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* defines *Dialektik* as 'der Art einer Disziplin mit der Analyse und Synthese von Begriffen und dient vornehmlich der Erkenntnis des Seienden, um die Ideen zu begreifen'; in Latin *dialectica* (from which the English, French, and German each derive) is defined as 'the art of methodical reasoning' (*Le Robert historique*). Patrick Murray is the only reader of *Capital* as far as I am aware who underlines, via this general, non-Hegelian meaning of 'dialectic,' the synthetic nature Marx's method of exposition, though he confusingly identifies the synthetic method of exposition with Descartes, rather than Spinoza and the latter's critique of the Cartesian 'analytic' method in the Introduction to *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (Murray 131).

Murray 396. Since Marx appears only to have known Spinoza's *Ethics* through Hegel's mischaracterization of that work, it seems that in developing his materialist critique of Hegel, Marx arrived spontaneously at his own original brand of a Spinozist materialism. On the disavowed proximity of Hegel to Spinoza, see Macherey 2011 [1979].

known by the intellect only as a thought-concrete without negation (*Capital*, or its contemporary iteration as the synthetic critique of the political economy of Covid).²⁷

In this view, human social relations bear no inner, essential drive toward their culmination in capitalism, as the imaginary doctrines of liberalism and neoliberalism would have us believe. Instead, as Marx first argued in his presentation of so-called primitive accumulation, and Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood have further insisted, the historical body of capitalism is composed through a fundamental and renewed *system of constraint* based upon the methodical dispossession of the means of production and reproduction of the working class, to form a *proletariat* in the precise sense Marx gives the term, through the existential, juridical, and regulated compulsion of human bodies to compose themselves, in real subsumption, as subjects of the valorisation of value under capitalism.²⁸

2) A positive dialectic, such as Macherey already discerns in the opening pages of *Capital* in 1965 and subsequently articulates in *Hegel or Spinoza*, requires for its adequate conceptualization the *synthetic* mode of presentation that Spinoza upholds (*more geometrico*) against the Cartesian defence and deployment of an *analytic* analysis. While Althusser famously defends Marx's 1857 epistemological distinction between the thought-concrete (*Gedankenkonkretum*) and the 'real' in Spinozist terms, a Spinozist *synthetic mode of presentation* arguably determines *Capital* to an even greater and unsuspected degree, and furthermore comes to displace the initial Hegelian negative dialectical formulations of the *Grundrisse* in the actual drafts of *Capital* after 1861.

The Spinozist defence of a synthetic method of presentation over the Cartesian *analytic* points forward to the crucial distinction between Marx's initial *analysis* of capital in the *Grundrisse* notebooks, and his subsequent and painstaking elaboration of an adequate synthetic demonstration—famously proceeding from abstract to concrete without ever leaving the realm of ideas—in *Capital*. Macherey's crucial commentary on the Spinozist synthetic method in this sense constitutes an oblique development of Althusser's famous analysis in *Reading Capital* of Marx's 1857 Introduction. The key advantage of the synthetic method, Spinoza argues in his only extended statement on his method,

.....
27 'In response to [Hegel's] finalist conception that abstractly summarizes an infinite sequence of determinations in the fiction of a unique intention, we must substitute an integrally causal explanation, one that does not take into account anything but the external relations of bodies.' (2011: 177).

28 'Each part of the [Spinozist] body,' Macherey writes, 'belongs to this global form that is the body taken in its entirety, not according to its own essence, but in light of this external liaison, whose *transitive necessity is one of constraint, which holds together all the elements....* The reason for this harmony is not found in an obscure predetermination of singular essences that inclines them to converge all together toward a unique essence (an ideal nature) but in *the transitive relationship of determination that constrains them, provisionally, to associate*' (1979: 177, my emphasis).

the Preface to the 1663 *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, is that while analysis proceeds from the knowledge of effects to that of their causes, synthetic demonstration proceeds in contrast ‘from the knowledge of causes to that of their effects, in conformity with the real order of things.’ Synthetic demonstration thus intimately corresponds to the ‘manner in which things are actually produced.’²⁹

The synthetic method should thus be understood, against Hegel’s misrepresentations of Spinozist method, as the truly materialist and dynamic method of demonstration: rather than *reproducing* or *representing* the real order of things in another order (that of thought), it constitutes instead the *presentation* of the real, it is, in other words, one and the same real order, grasped in the domain or attribute of the intellect. The synthetic method is thus just the opposite of a sterile reproduction; synthesis deploys the productive and creative dynamism of the intellect, ‘empowering ideas and things with an identical force whose basic principal is found in nature, taken absolutely, [... making manifest] the rigorous and complex syntax to which the real itself obeys in its effective constitution’ (1998: 18, 19). As Macherey first indicated in *Reading Capital*, Marx’s *Gedankenkonkretum*, the unfinished work-in-progress we know as the three volumes of *Capital*, contains a fundamental, if largely invisible, synthetic mode of presentation of its claims.³⁰

3) *Capital* should be read in light of the Spinozist epistemology of the three forms of knowledge: 1) imaginary, 2) via general or common notions, and, as Althusser reminds us, 3) in light of eternity, as ‘the adequate knowledge of a complex object by the adequate knowledge of its complexity’ (RC 255). Each of these modes of understanding has in turn its element of truth and necessity, though only the third is fully adequate to the comprehension of its object.

An example of Marx’s deployment of the *imaginary* occurs for example in his famous, image of the ‘language of commodities’:

.....
29 Macherey 1998: 17.

30 Jacques Bidet has insightfully identified crucial moments of what I am calling after Macherey a positive dialectic in *Capital*. Implicitly developing Macherey’s precocious, Althusserian identification of various non-dialectical conceptual leaps in the opening pages of *Capital*, Bidet points to the crucial movement from the concept of the commodity to that of capital in Marx’s exposition (from Part 1 to Part 2, chs. 4-6)—a passage devoid of dialectical continuity, genesis, deduction, or transition—between the presentation, that is to say, of C-M-C and that of M-C-M’. Bidet describes this as an ‘isolated intervention’ at this crucial axial moment of Marx’s argument, one in which contradiction (the apparent impossibility that the exchange of equal values can nonetheless produce surplus value) is not a matter of essence, but ideological existence, a merely apparent contradiction that in fact shrivels away in the face of Marx’s synthetic presentation of the concept of surplus-value and valorisation in chapter 6 (‘The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power’) (Jacques Bidet, *Exploring Marx’s Capital* 2005: 160-62).

Everything our analysis of the value of commodities previously told us is repeated by the linen itself, as soon as it enters into association with another commodity, the coat. Only *it reveals its thoughts in a language with which it alone is familiar, the language of commodities*. In order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, i.e. is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself. (1976: 143, my emphasis)

Marx here supplements the synthetic analysis of the structure of capital as a social form (the object of Chapter I prior to the appearance of this passage) with an imaginary figure, that of two animated commodities, a length of linen and a coat, in an image that bears its own measure of truth and even necessity. Marx seems to be telling his reader that the abstraction that is value must be thought, not just as concept, but also vividly imagined, in the form of an animated manifestation in the concrete materiality that is the human symbolic order. This is indeed the key conclusion to the question I posed initially as to the object of Marx’s materialist analysis; Laplanche and Pontalis, invoking at once Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, articulate this materialist concept of the object of analysis that is the symbolic order with elegant simplicity: ‘The reality of a symbolic order structuring interhuman reality’ constitutes in this view a ‘symbolic system’: for Lévi-Strauss, kinship, language, and ‘economic relations,’ for Lacan, the structure of the unconscious, and for Marx, I would add, the social form of commodity production and valorisation.³¹

Fredric Jameson has in this sense identified the more general repetition of what he terms ‘figural demonstration’ as central to the stylistic apparatus of *Capital*, a rhetorical process to which Marx repeatedly resorts in the attempt to represent to his reader the immaterial, real substance of surplus-value, abstract labor (in the above example), or, in another of example Jameson develops, in the sense of the figuration of ‘separation’ that occurs in Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation.³²

A second, by now familiar order of demonstration inherent in *Capital* is its presentation of a structure of general notions or categories,

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31 Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (PUF, 1967: 475). The encompassing nature of the symbolic, both exceeding and preceding the interpellation of the subject, was reaffirmed by Slovenj Žižek in the context of his initial critique of Althusser: ‘The “real abstraction” is unthinkable in the frame of the fundamental Althusserian distinction between the ‘real object’ and the ‘object of knowledge’ in so far as it introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought—in short: the symbolic order’ (cited at Alberto Toscano 2008 ‘The Open Secret of Real Abstraction. *Rethinking Marxism*, 20:2, 279). The point here is not Žižek’s oblique critique of Althusser, but rather his fundamental reassertion of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order as the objective field in which Marxian critique and subjectivity itself unfold.

32 Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One*. (New York: Verso 2014) 31, 81-93.

as what Marx calls the 'value-form' (Vol. I, Chapter 1.3, 'The Value-Form'), an order that, grasped in the complexity of its general articulation, constitutes the 'structure' of capital in the Spinozist sense of the synchronic that Althusser indicates (RC 255). This structure forms a general, universal exposition of the laws of the tendencies of capitalist valorisation, accumulation, and reproduction. In addition to the various writings of the ISMT indicated above and, in France, those of Jacques Bidet, Moishe Postone's reconstruction of Marx's system in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* constitutes a crucial moment in such a reading of *Capital* as a system of general notions.³³

Finally, Macherey's thought demonstrates—with no contradiction in terms whatsoever—that an adequately *materialist* analysis of the contemporary conjuncture, requires above all that we learn to read *Capital from the perspective of the eternity of the singular nature of its object*. Such a reading might take many forms; for this reader of *Capital*, and as a necessary, apodictic supplement to the mere assertions of imminent collapse from the *Wertkritik* school and *De virus illustribus* in particular, it seems essential to take into account the full development of Marx's founding epistemological distinction between the production of surplus-value as a total mass and its subsequent distribution among many individual capitals in the manifest form of profit via competition, such as Fred Moseley has systematically argued. While Marx famously defines abstract labor as the *substance* of surplus value ('The labor that forms the substance of value is equal human labour, the expenditure of identical human labour-power' [1976: 129]), we might further say with Moseley that *surplus-value, as distinct from material wealth, itself forms the general substance of capital*.³⁴ It is the crisis of the production of this substance, for example, that may be said to underwrite the *Wertkritik* assertions of the necessity of the collapse of valorisation.

In this view, Marx abstracts from the temporal existence of production and the phenomenology of individual laborers and capitalists, to present, at every level of the increasing degrees of concretion that characterise the analysis of *Capital*, a *monetary analysis* that might rightly be characterised via the eternity of the concept of the equivalency of two phenomenally heterogeneous use-values (in the sense that Spinoza speaks of the adequate concept of the triangle³⁵): 'Money,' Moseley

33 Jacques Bidet, *Explication et reconstruction du 'Capital'* Paris: PUF 2015; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

34 'The most essential common property of all capitals [i.e., its 'substance,' ...] is the production of surplus-value.' Fred Moseley, *Money and Totality: A Macro-Monetary Interpretation of Marx's Logic in Capital and the End of the 'Transformation Problem.'* Chicago: Haymarket 2017, 43.

35 'From the nature of a triangle it follows from eternity to eternity that its three angles are equal to two right angles.' *E* IP17S. It should be noted in the context of this argument, that to indicate the movement of *Capital from the abstract to the concrete* is to grasp the 'concrete' not as the abandon-

writes, 'is derived in the very first chapter (Section 3) of Volume I, as the *necessary form of appearance of abstract labor*, and from then on Marx's theory is about quantities of money that represent, and thus are determined by, quantities of labor time' (9).

This in turn—as Moseley demonstrates in detail across Marx's innumerable manuscripts—entails that *Capital* is constructed at two levels of determination: first, an initial determination of the production of a total mass of surplus volume (its 'substance'), and subsequently, in analytical terms, via the determination of the distribution of that mass of value among competing individual capitals.³⁶ Marx's presentation, repeatedly invoking individual processes and factors of production, is admittedly confusing on this point; Moseley convincingly argues, however, that 'Marx's theory in Volume I is about the total capital and the total surplus-value produced in the economy as a whole, [even though] the theory is [necessarily] illustrated in terms of an individual capital and even a single, solitary worker. [...] Individual capitals are not analysed as separate and distinct real capitals, but rather as representatives and "aliquot parts" of the total social capital' (45-46). As Marx himself writes, 'In capitalist production [i.e., in Volume I], *each capital is assumed to be a unit, an aliquot part of the total capital*' (cited at Moseley 46, Moseley's insertion). Here again, we confirm Spinoza's insistence upon the necessary inherence of all three forms of knowledge in the adequate presentation of (Marx's) object, even including in his apodictic, synthetic analysis the imaginary figure of the 'single, solitary worker.'

Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectic of enlightenment, refigured in light of Robert Kurz' critique of the sacrificial subject of capital, culminates in this destructive dialectic of the pandemic in the form of human and social catastrophe, in which the elderly and juvenile, the sick, and unproductive are the first to be sacrificed to the demands of valorisation (*De virus illustribus* 64, 67). A Spinozist critique of Covid thus must ask, in conclusion, how does the capitalist social form necessitate these pandemic effects? It must seek to avoid the personalization of causes, the psychologizing stories we tell ourselves about the free will and malevolent decisions of the governing classes (Trump, Johnson, or Babiš' negligence or malicious intent), but instead strive adequately to grasp the necessity not only of the true (the scientific nature of Covid-19 as much as that of the

ment of an abstract conceptual order for that of an empiricist, sensuous concretion, but, to invoke instead the meaning of 'concrete' closest to the Latin *concrecere*, indicating the cohesion or growing together of parts into a complex mass, compound or composite (always remaining in the attribute of thought) (cf. Bidet 2009: 174).

36 'The total amount of surplus-value must be determined prior to its division into individual parts' (Marx, cited at Moseley 46).

capitalist social form itself in its contemporary iterations), but of the false, as the index of its own, necessary falsity (Covid as the horrible revelation of the inherent and narcissistic inadequacy of the governing classes, in which Trump is only the extreme variation of the law of this tendency). If in the spring of 2020, from where I write in the Czech Republic, masks first appeared as the totemic guardian and salvation against the onslaught of the global plague, the raging onslaught of second and third waves of the pandemic has necessarily lead subjects to sacrifice the totem itself in public bonfires of libertarianism. Trump and Biden, themselves totemic wardens of the teleology of American salvation, stand as the evil and benevolent fetishes of a promised, vanishing redemption; should Biden actually win the American presidency, he too may predictably be sacrificed to the bonfires of capital, as the pandemic rages on into the spring and the bodies of the dead continue to accumulate globally, our imaginary tendencies to renewed hope and faith once again confronted, in essence, with the real contradiction between the valorisation of value and the reproduction of capital.

Prague, October 2020

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Volume 7
Issue 3

Pandemic Economics

Michael Roberts

Abstract: There have been over one million deaths from the COVID-19 infection so far. The pandemic forced governments across the world into emergency lockdowns that pushed nearly all parts of the world economy into the deepest slump in production, investment, consumption, and employment since the 1930s. There is optimism that world economy will bounce back in 2021 in a V-shaped recovery. But that seems unlikely because global capitalism was in trouble before the pandemic hit and was already heading into a recession. The lockdown slump was just a tipping point. Also, the pandemic is not yet over and infections continue to mount. The impact of the pandemic lockdowns on employment and incomes, particularly for the poorest countries and the poorest in all countries has been devastating and will leave permanent scarring on economies and livelihoods. And there is no internationally coordinated plan to contain the pandemic and to restore livelihoods. Market-led economies and health systems have failed. Only a social economy where there is public ownership and community control of finance and industry can turn the world economy around for working people.

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Volume 7
Issue 3

Keywords: pandemic, economy, recession, depression, Keynes, stimulus

The global response to COVID-19

As of October 2020, there have now been more than 35 million cases of COVID-19 infections, with more than one million deaths. That's a death rate of 3.3%. Each year influenza kills about 0.1% of people who catch it. By this measure, COVID-19 virus is clearly much more deadly. Of course, not everybody has been infected, but micro-studies suggest that around 0.5%-1% of those infected with COVID-19 would die; that is about five to ten times more deadly than annual influenza. Quick math shows that with a world population of about 7.2bn and assuming 'herd immunity' is achieved at 65% of the population, then an uncontained virus could have killed 35m people.

But the impact of COVID-19 has been contained – if in many cases more by luck than judgement. Governments around the world have been warned for decades that new pathogens deadly to humans were emerging ever more frequently and likely to turn into pandemics. From SARS, MERS, Ebola, and now COVID-19, epidemiologists and health organisations have been warning of the impending danger. The UN set up a Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB) which reported only last September 2019 and warned of a viral pandemic and commented: “[P]reparedness is hampered by the lack of continued political will at all levels... Although national leaders respond to health crises when fear and panic grow strong enough, most countries do not devote the consistent energy and resources needed to keep outbreaks from escalating into disasters.”¹

Yes, the dangers were ignored. And there are several reasons why. First, it has become clear that these new pathogens have emerged because

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¹ https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/annual_report/GPMB_annualreport_2019.pdf

of the relentless expansion of capitalist production and industrialisation into all parts of the globe, uncontrolled and with no regard for the environment and nature. Fossil fuel, mineral exploration, and timber logging, plus industrial plantation farming and sprawling urbanisation have brought pathogens, which for thousands of years have been in wild life like bats and other remotely based animals, into contact with farm animals and then with humans through wildlife food markets and farming. But governments did not want to know because effective action would mean the curbing of profitable industrial expansion.

And the lack of preparation was also exhibited in the failure of big pharmaceutical firms to invest in research and production of effective vaccines to provide humans with immunity. The technology is there to do this – as we now see with the mad rush by many pharmaceutical companies to produce a vaccine. But before the pandemic, 16 out of the top 20 American pharmaceutical companies did no research at all in vaccines to deal with such diseases because they were previously concentrated in the poor parts of world where there was no profit to be made. They preferred to concentrate on anti-depressants, opioids, diabetes, and cancers; the diseases of the 'global north'.

And then there was the state of health systems around the world. In the advanced capitalist countries, public health systems have been starved of funding, privatised and hollowed out over the last 40 years to the benefit of private profit and the market. A 2015 study of tuberculosis rates in 99 countries found that cuts in public spending on healthcare and the privatization of the health sector were related to a higher prevalence of TB.² This was set against decades of privatization of health-care systems in developing countries, often encouraged by the World Bank and IMF.

So most health systems were already stretched to the limit in dealing with illness and disease – indeed, it was 'efficient' to run health capacity at 99%, with no room for major emergencies. Many health systems had no stock of necessary equipment for virus pandemics like masks, PPE, ventilators, or even medicines to ameliorate the impact of the virus. When the pandemic hit, many health systems in Europe were overwhelmed, forcing governments either to allow people to die (not a good political move) or impose drastic lockdowns – or both, unfortunately. Also, health systems were then forced to concentrate on the COVID-19 patients to the detriment of other seriously ill patients, leading to secondary deaths.

Recent studies have shown that a 10% increase in the percentage of hospital beds per 1,000 people results in a 1.7% decrease in COVID-19 deaths.³ Some of the highest mortality rates are in the US, Italy, and Spain (which have around 3 hospital beds per 1,000 people), whereas less privatized systems have a much higher ratio of hospital beds per people, e.g. Germany (8.2), South Korea (10.9), and Japan (13.4). In other words, the

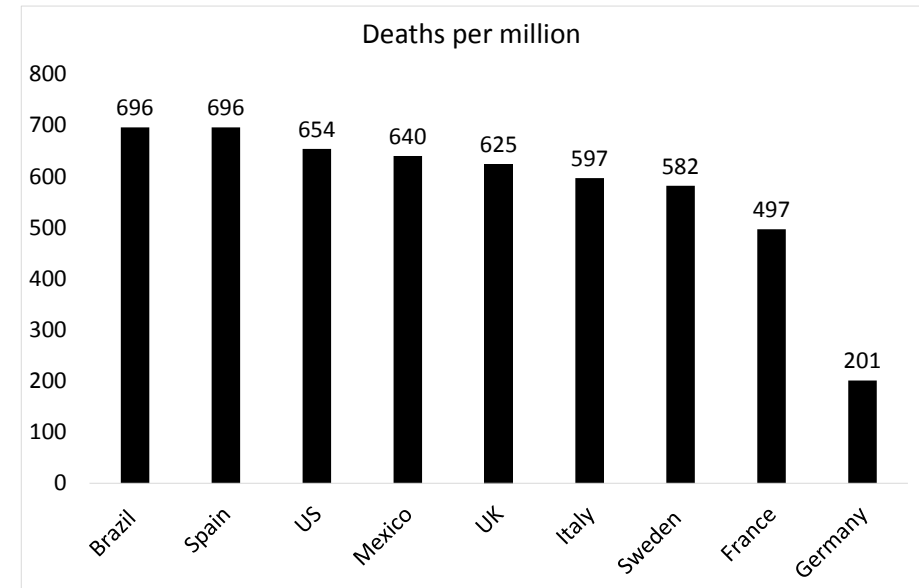
2 <https://developingeconomics.org/2020/06/21/privatization-and-the-pandemic/>

3 <https://developingeconomics.org/2020/06/21/privatization-and-the-pandemic/>

more a health system is public and properly funded and resourced, the more success it has in saving lives. Privatisation kills.

Of course, there was talk among the corporate boardrooms and government committees in some countries, that as COVID-19 only killed mostly the old, sick and infirm and did little damage to the young and those healthy and of working age, it would be better to go for 'herd immunity'. Indeed, wiping out the old and sick would save public money eventually and boost productivity! But such a 'Malthusian solution' was generally rejected as too dangerous politically to adopt.

Some governments like Sweden tried to claim that lockdowns were unnecessary and social distancing would be enough. That has not proved to be the case, as Sweden's death rate has been ten times higher than its neighbours of 'locked down' Denmark, Norway, or Finland – and indeed Sweden's death rate is now close to initially hard-hit Italy. Other autocratic and right-wing governments like those in Brazil or the US have claimed that COVID-19 is a 'hoax', or no worse than flu and so there was no need for any containment. Again, policies based on that view have proved to be disastrous for the death rates of these countries.



But lockdowns alone were no answer to containing the pandemic. The countries that have succeeded most in controlling the virus and saving lives have been those that had early lockdowns, but also effective mass testing and tracing of infections, fully serviced health systems, and massive community cooperation. China, where the virus started, has had only 5000 deaths or 3 per million. Taiwan, South Korea, New Zealand, and in Europe, the Scandinavian countries (except Sweden), have also succeeded to varying degrees.⁴

4 <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

However, in the so-called Global South, lockdowns have not been successful in containing the virus because it is impossible for most households to work from home with broadband and millions are casual informal labourers who have to go to work, come what may. And living in slums close together is no environment for effective isolation or social distancing. Moreover, health systems in these countries are inadequate and mainly private, so there is minimal testing and those infected severely cannot get treatment. Thus, hundreds of millions in Peru (the worst affected country in the world), Mexico, India, South Africa, etc. are still being infected. Cases continue to skyrocket there, even if the relatively young populations mean that death rates are low.

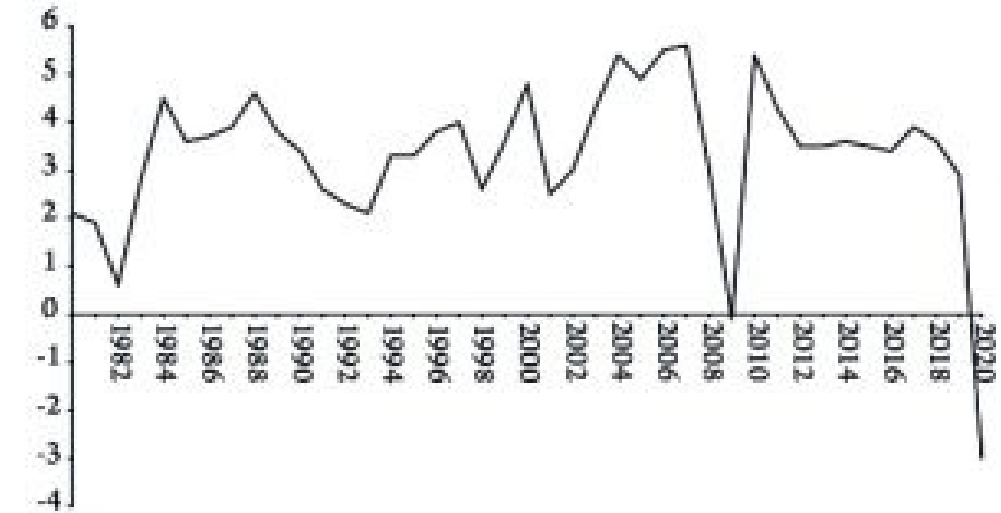
In the advanced capitalist countries of North America, Europe, and Asia, the lockdowns have been gradually relaxed. This has led to a new wave of localised virus eruptions, but death rates are not so high now as the virus now mainly affects the young and healthy, with the old self-isolating, and health systems are better prepared. Even so, the old and the sick are still forced to stay at home or in residential units with no prospect of having 'a life'. And many of those who were severely affected by the virus have been left with permanent damage to respiratory and heart systems and other 'mysterious illnesses'. There is permanent scarring.

And there is permanent scarring to the world economy and people's livelihoods. The world capitalist economy is suffering the largest contraction in output and income in over 100 years (since the 'Spanish flu' epidemic). Over 500m people globally are being driven back into 'official poverty' (earning less than \$5.50 a day). Millions of people have lost and will lose their jobs globally, as well as small businesses closing for good. Government bailouts with cash hand-outs for the unemployed and loans to companies have been inadequate to save jobs and incomes and cannot go on for much longer. So bankruptcies will explode and a new global financial crisis is on the horizon.

Everybody is waiting for the vaccines that will give us immunity. But experience shows that vaccines are never fully effective (for example annual flu vaccines are only 60% effective). Moreover, there will be more pandemics to come, based on new pathogens. Health systems remain underfunded and inadequate to deal with them. And there is no international cooperation or plan to control the expansion of fossil fuel exploration (on the contrary) or industrial farming that brought the viruses in the first place. There is no end in sight.

Around 2.7 billion workers worldwide have been affected by full or partial lockdown measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic, i.e., around 81% of the world's 3.3 billion workforce. The world economy has seen nothing like this. Nearly all economic forecasts for global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 are for a contraction much worse than in the Great Recession of 2008-9.

Global real GDP growth (percentage)
Source: International Monetary Fund data.



During the lockdowns, output in most economies fell by a quarter according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), with the effects felt in sectors amounting to a third of GDP in the major economies. For each month of containment, there is a loss of 2 percentage points in annual GDP growth. Kenneth Rogoff, co-author with Carmen Reinhart of work on the history of economic crises, reckons that the short-term collapse in global output is likely to rival or exceed any recession in the past 150 years.⁵ International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief Kristalina Georgieva projects that "over 170 countries will experience *negative* per capita income growth this year."⁶ Investment bank JPMorgan's economists predict that the pandemic will cost the world at least \$5.5 trillion in lost output, greater than the annual output of Japan. And that would be lost forever. That is almost 8% of GDP through to the end of 2021. The cost to developed economies alone will be greater than that lost in the recessions of 2008-9 and 1974-5 combined. One recent study argues that the lockdowns in the US will leave production 25-28% below pre-COVID levels in the short run. US employment fell by 30 million in the first half of 2020 and so far has only recovered by less than half.⁷ At the current rate of recovery, US employment will not return to its trend level before the end of 2022.

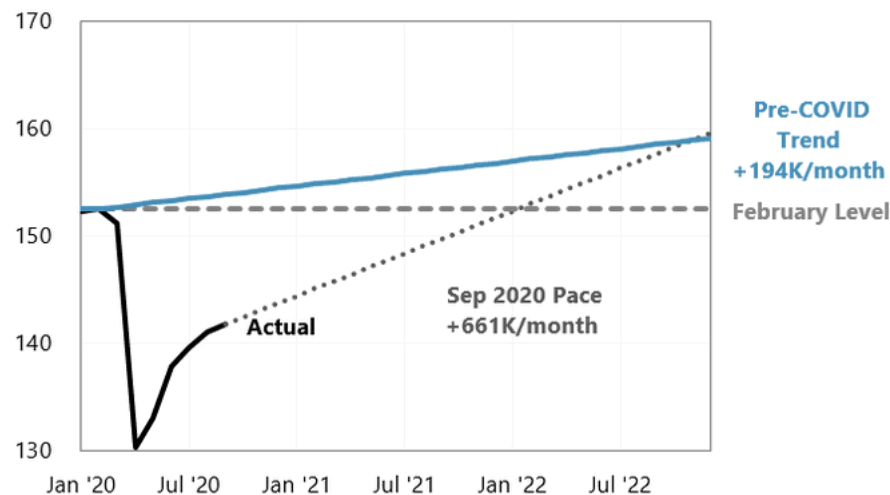
⁵ Rogoff, 2020a; Reinhart and Rogoff, 2010

⁶ Georgieva, 2020

⁷ Mulligan, 2002.

Nonfarm Payroll Employment

Millions



Source: BLS, Evercore ISI.

In my 2016 book *The Long Depression*,⁸ I found that the loss of GDP from the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008 through the 18 months to the trough in mid-2009 was over 6% in the major economies. Global real GDP fell by about 3.5% over that period, as the so-called emerging market economies did not contract—mainly because China continued to expand.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reckons the global economy's real GDP will contract by about 4.3% this year, leaving global output by year's end over \$6 trillion short (in current US dollars) of what economists had expected it to be before the COVID-19 pathogen began to spread. *"In short, the world is grappling with the equivalent of a complete wipe out of the Brazilian, Indian, and Mexican economies. And as domestic activity contracts, so goes the international economy; trade will shrink by around one fifth this year, foreign direct investment flows by up to 40 per cent and remittances will drop by over \$100 billion."*⁹

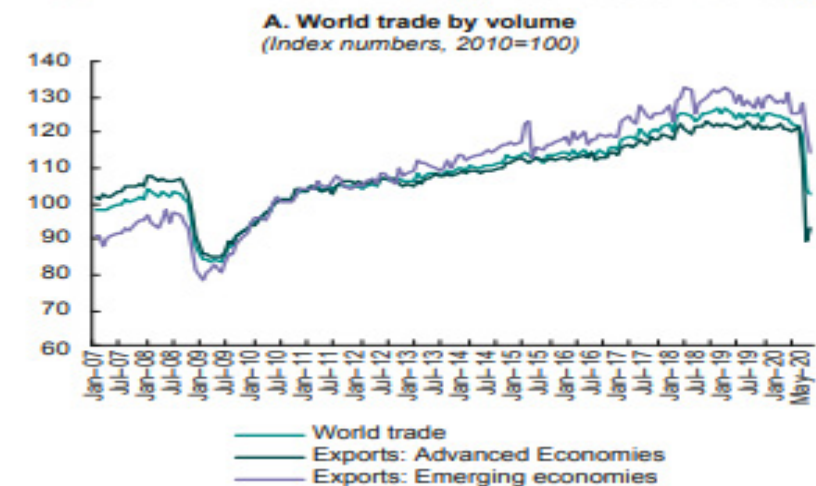
World trade was already falling at a 2% annual rate before the pandemic because of weakening economies and the US-China trade war. Now trade is expected to contract by over 13% this year, faster than during the Great Recession.¹⁰ The collapse in goods trade is particularly damaging to the so-called developing or emerging economies of the

⁸ Roberts, 2016.

⁹ <https://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2853>

¹⁰ World Trade Organisation, 2020.

'Global South'. Many are exporters of basic commodities such as fuel, industrial metals, and agricultural products, whose prices have plummeted since the end of the Great Recession.



Emerging markets disaster

Many larger economies in the Global South—such as Mexico, Argentina, and South Africa—were already in a recession when the pandemic hit. Oxford Economics now forecasts that output in emerging markets will have fallen by 1.5% in 2020, the first decline since reliable records began in 1951. This figure includes the giant economies of China and India. It was their growth during the Great Recession that ensured that there was no average contraction among developing economies then. This time it is different.

As for the smaller emerging economies, the situation is already deteriorating fast. The World Bank believes that the pandemic will push sub-Saharan Africa into recession in 2020 for the first time in 25 years. In its *Africa's Pulse* report, the Bank said the region's economy will contract by 2.1-5.1%, compared to growth of 2.4% last year, and that coronavirus will cost sub-Saharan Africa \$37-79 billion in lost output this year due to trade losses, value chain disruption, and other factors.¹¹ More than 90 'emerging' countries, nearly half the world's nations, have enquired about bailouts from the IMF—and at least 60 have sought to avail themselves of World Bank programmes. These two institutions together have resources of up to \$1.2 trillion available to battle the economic fallout but only \$50 billion of this can be deployed to "emerging markets", and only \$10 billion to low-income members. These figures are tiny compared with the losses in income, GDP, and capital outflows. Since January, nearly \$100 billion of capital has flowed out of emerging markets, according to data from the Institute of International Finance (IIF), compared to \$26 billion

¹¹ World Bank, 2020

outflow during the global financial crisis of a decade ago. According to Rogoff, “an avalanche of government-debt crises is sure to follow...the system just cannot handle this many defaults and restructurings at the same time”.¹² Moreover, the last thing that distressed economies need is another loan from the IMF, as the example of Pakistan demonstrates. The IMF is still demanding austerity measures from the Pakistan government in the middle of this pandemic in return for previous loans.¹³

In addition to this government debt crisis, there has been a growth of private debt since the Great Recession, and this has been taking place fastest in the so-called developing economies. As a number of economists at the World Bank point out: “Most of the increase in debt since 2010 has been in emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs), which saw their debt rise by 54 percentage points of GDP to a record high of about 170% of GDP in 2018. This increase has been broad-based, affecting around 80 percent of EMDEs”.¹⁴ Much of this debt is denominated in US dollars, and as that hegemonic currency increases in value as a “safe haven” during the crisis, the burden of repayment will mount for these economies.

There is little room to boost government spending to alleviate the hit. The “developing” economies are in a much weaker position than during the global financial crisis of 2008-9. In 2007, 40 emerging market and middle-income countries had a combined central government fiscal *surplus* of 0.3% of gross domestic product. Last year, the same economies posted a fiscal *deficit* of 4.9% of GDP. The government deficit across “emerging market” economies in Asia went from 0.7% of GDP in 2007 to 5.8% in 2019; in Latin America, it rose from 1.2% of GDP to 4.9%; and in Europe it went from a surplus of 1.9% of GDP to a deficit of 1%.

Global unemployment is also rocketing. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reckons that the income earned by workers round the world fell more than 10 per cent in the first nine months of 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic — a loss worth more than \$3.5tn, or 5.5% of world GDP. The estimated total working-hour losses in the second quarter of 2020 (relative to the fourth quarter of 2019) are now 17.3%, or 495 million full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs. Working-hour losses are expected to remain high in the third quarter of 2020, at 12.1 per cent or 345 million FTE jobs. More than 400 million enterprises—made up of companies and self-employed people—are in “at risk” sectors such as manufacturing, retail, restaurants and hotels.¹⁵

Underemployment is also expected to increase on a large scale. And, as witnessed in previous crises, the shock to labour demand is likely

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¹² Rogoff, 2020b.

¹³ See Ali Jan, 2020; Roberts, 2018

¹⁴ Kose and others, 2020

¹⁵ ILO, 2020

to translate into significant downward adjustments to wages and working hours. The strain on incomes resulting from the decline in economic activity will devastate workers close to or below the poverty line. Under the “mid and high” economic damage projections from the ILO, there will be 20-30 million more people in working poverty than before the pre-COVID-19 estimate for 2020.

There are few or no “safety nets” in these countries. The hit to working people in the advanced capitalist countries from a global slump, even if short-lived, will be severe, especially after years of austerity and wage suppression. For the billions in the “developing” countries, it will be devastating.

The World Bank reckons that the pandemic will push between 88m and 115m people into extreme poverty this year, which the bank defines as living on less than \$1.90 a day (a ridiculously low threshold). More than 80% of those who will fall into extreme poverty are in middle-income countries, with south Asia the worst-hit region, followed by sub-Saharan Africa. That would set poverty levels back to their 2017 levels. Nearly 7% of the world's population will live on less than \$1.90 a day by 2030, the report said, compared with a target of less than 3% under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁶

Progress in reducing poverty had been slowing before the pandemic anyway. About 52m people worldwide rose out of (World Bank) poverty between 2015 and 2017 but the rate of poverty reduction had slowed to less than half a percentage point a year during that period, after reductions of about 1% a year between 1990 and 2015. And all the reduction in poverty rates have been in Asia, in particular East Asia, and in particular China. Strip China out and there has been little or no improvement in absolute poverty in 30 years.

A quick recovery?

Nonetheless, mainstream economic forecasters have remained optimistic proclaiming a sharp recovery in this second half of 2020. China is recovering fast, the argument goes, and the major capitalist economies will bounce back once the pandemic subsides or the authorities are able to contain it.

Optimism has been seen in global stock markets too, particularly in the US. After falling around 30% when the lockdowns were imposed, the US stock market jumped back to new highs by the summer. There were two reasons. The first was the belief that the lockdowns would soon be over; treatments and vaccines were on their way to stop the virus and the pandemic would soon be forgotten. For example, the US treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, argued at the beginning of the lockdowns, that “you’re going to see the economy really bounce back in July, August and September.” Senior White House economics advisor Kevin Hassett

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¹⁶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/10/07/global-action-urgently-needed-to-halt-historic-threats-to-poverty-reduction>

stated that by the fourth quarter of 2020, the US economy “is going to be really strong and next year is going to be a tremendous year.” Chief economist at the Bank of England, Andy Haldane reckons that Britain’s rapid recovery from its COVID-19 slump is being put at risk by undue pessimism and a “Chicken Licken” fear that the sky is about to fall in. “Pessimism can be as contagious as the disease – and as damaging to our economic fortunes. Avoiding economic anxiety is crucial to support the ongoing recovery.”¹⁷

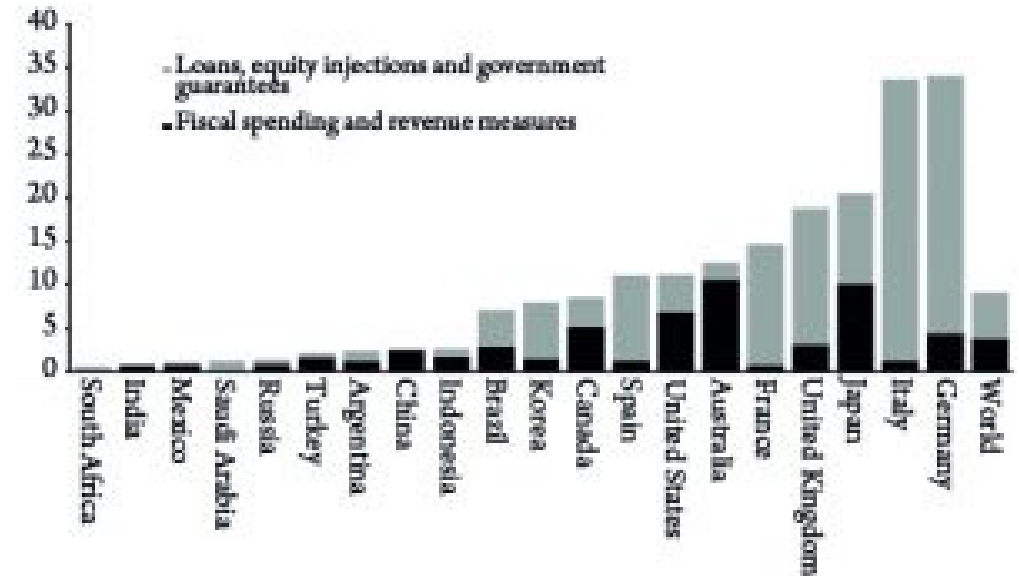
The second reason was the recent credit injections by the Federal Reserve (the US central bank) and the government’s fiscal measures. Central banks and even the international agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank have jumped in to inject credit through the purchases of government bonds, corporate bonds, student loans, and even more exotic financial assets on a scale never seen before, even during 2008-9. The Federal Reserve’s treasury purchases are already racing ahead of previous quantitative easing programmes. Economists project the central bank’s portfolio of bonds, loans, and new programmes will swell to between \$8-11 trillion from less than \$4 trillion last year. In that range, the portfolio would be twice the size reached following the previous crisis and nearly half the value of US annual output. This would make the central bank’s role in the economy greater than during the Great Depression or Second World War. “The Federal Reserve is being sent on a mission to places it has never been before,” according to Adam Tooze, the author of *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*. He writes that central bank officials “are being sucked into a series of entanglements that they cannot control and that they normally will not touch with a long pole, but this time felt they had to go in, and go in hard”.¹⁸

The fiscal spending approved by the US Congress far exceeds the spending programme during the Great Recession. It has reached over 4% of GDP in fiscal stimulus and another 5% in credit injections and government guarantees. That is twice the amount in the Great Recession, with some key countries ploughing in even more to compensate workers put out of work and small businesses closed down (see figure 6).

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/sep/30/banks-chief-economist-warns-against-chicken-licken-pessimism-uk>

¹⁸ Tooze, 2020.

Fiscal packages as percentage of GDP, 2020
Source: IMF data, author’s calculations.



Most of this largesse is to keep business, particularly big business, alive, rather than to help workers and small businesses. If we take the \$2 trillion package agreed by the US Congress, two-thirds of it has gone in the form of outright cash injections and loans that may not be repaid, to big business (travel companies and so on) and to smaller businesses, but just one-third to helping the millions of workers and self-employed people to survive with cash handouts and tax deferrals. Indeed, those payments ended in October with little prospect of a new package, at least this side of the US presidential election.

It is the same picture in Europe: first, save big business; second, tide over working people. Moreover, the payments for workers laid off and the self-employed are now being phased out and so fall short of providing sufficient support for the millions that have already been locked down or have seen their companies lay them off. The reality is that the money being shifted towards working people compared to big business is minimal.

Moreover, the pandemic slump will not be ended by central bank largesse or the fiscal packages. Once a slump gets under way, incomes collapse and unemployment rises fast. This has a cascade or “multiplier” effect through the economy, particularly for non-financial companies. This will eventually lead to a sequence of bankruptcies and closures, deepening and prolonging the slump.

This scenario is denied not just by government officials and bankers who think that the economic damage from the pandemic and lockdowns will be short, if not so sweet. Many Keynesian economists in the US are making the same point. Larry Summers, who was treasury secretary

under Bill Clinton, reckons the lockdown slump was akin to businesses in summer tourist destinations closing down for the winter. As soon as summer comes along, they all open up and are ready to go just as before: “The recovery can be faster than many people expect because it has the character of the recovery from the total depression that hits a Cape Cod economy every winter or the recovery in American GDP that takes place every Monday morning”.¹⁹ Leading Keynesian guru Paul Krugman believes that this slump is not an economic crisis but a “disaster relief” situation.²⁰ While there might have to be higher spending now, and an increase in the deficit, once this spending has worked, the economy will return to its previous state and the deficit will be repaid.

The reason for this optimism is that Keynesian theory starts with the view that slumps are the result of a collapse in “effective demand” that then leads to a fall in output and employment. But this slump is not the result of a collapse in “demand”, but of a closure of production, both in manufacturing and particularly in services. It is a “supply shock”, not a “demand shock”.

The “financialisation” theorists of the Hyman Minsky school are also at a loss, because this slump is not the result of a credit crunch or financial crash—although that may yet come.²¹ This pandemic hit the world economy through supply, not demand as the Keynesians want to claim.²² It is production, trade, and investment that stops first when shops, schools, and businesses are locked down in order to contain the pandemic. Of course, if people cannot work and businesses cannot sell, then incomes drop and spending collapses, producing a “demand shock”. Indeed, it is the way with all capitalist crises: they start with a contraction of supply and end up with a fall in consumption, not vice versa.

The Keynesians believe that as soon as people get back to work and start spending, “effective demand” (and even “pent-up” demand) will shoot up and the capitalist economy will return to normal. But if you approach the slump from the angle of supply or production, and in particular, the profitability of resuming output and employment, which is the Marxist approach, then both the cause of the slump and the likelihood of a slow and weak recovery become clear.

Indeed, UNCTAD reckons that a V-shaped recovery from the 2020 slump is not likely. But even a full V-shaped recovery with annual growth next year above 5% and the world economy returning to its 2019 level by end of 2021 would still leave a \$12 trillion income shortfall in its wake and

19 Quoted in Cohan, 2020.

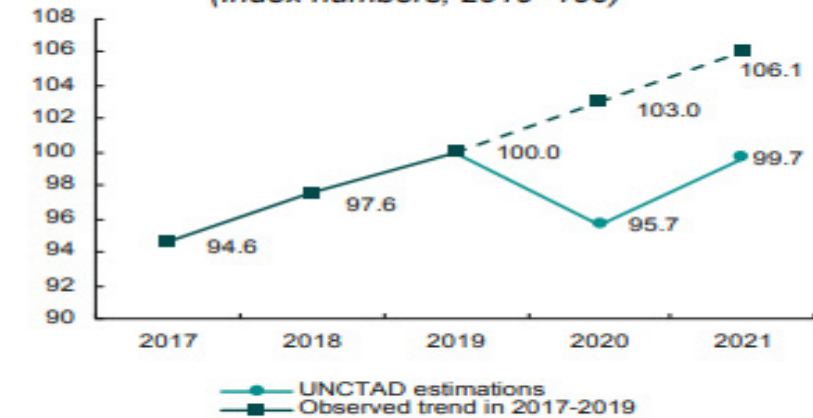
20 Krugman, 2020.

21 Hyman Minsky argued that financial systems would tend to move from stability to fragility, resulting in a sudden collapse of financial asset prices. His work has influenced many “post-Keynesian” economists. See Roberts, 2019a.

22 As Marx wrote in a letter to his friend Louis Kugelmann in 1868, “every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish”—Marx, 1988, p68.

an engorged debt burden, particularly in the public sector. But even that is not going to happen, says UNCTAD: “Our own assessment also sees the bounce continuing into next year albeit with stronger headwinds weakening the pace of global recovery which will, under the best scenario, struggle to climb above 4 per cent.”

FIGURE 1.1 World output level, 2017–2021
(Index numbers, 2019=100)



Source: UNCTAD secretariat calculations, based on United Nations Global Policy Model.

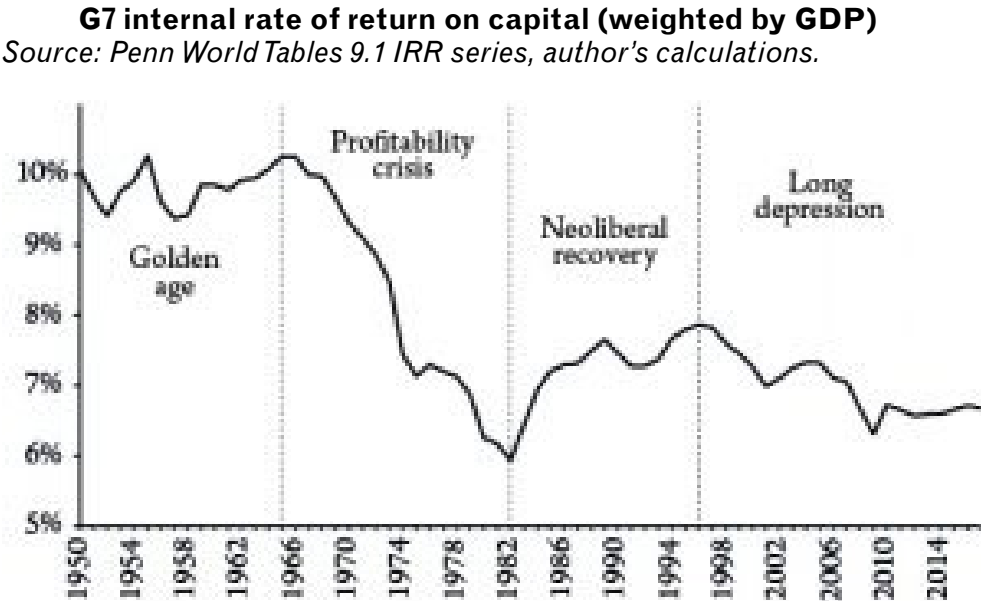
The tipping-point

One reason not to expect a V-shaped recovery is that Covid-19 was the tipping-point for the world capitalist economy already in trouble. One analogy is to imagine a pile of sand building up to a peak. Grains of sand start to slip off—and then comes a certain point when, with one more sand particle added, the whole sand pile collapses. If you are a post-Keynesian you might prefer calling this a “Minsky moment”, following Minsky’s argument that capitalism appears to be stable until it isn’t — because ‘stability breeds instability’. A Marxist would agree that, yes, there is instability, but would add that instability turns into an avalanche periodically because of the underlying contradictions in the capitalist mode of production.

As the British Marxist economist Chris Dillow argues, the coronavirus epidemic is really just an *extra* factor keeping the major capitalist economies dysfunctional and stagnant. He lays the main cause of the stagnation on the long-term decline in the profitability of capital: “Basic theory (and common sense) tells us that there should be a link between yields on financial assets and those on real ones, so low yields on bonds should be a sign of low yields on physical capital. And they are.” He identifies “three big facts”: the slowdown in productivity growth; the vulnerability to crisis; and low-grade jobs. As he says, “Of course, all these trends have long been discussed by Marxists: a falling rate of profit;

monopoly leading to stagnation; proneness to crisis; and worse living conditions for many people. And there is plenty of evidence for them”.²³

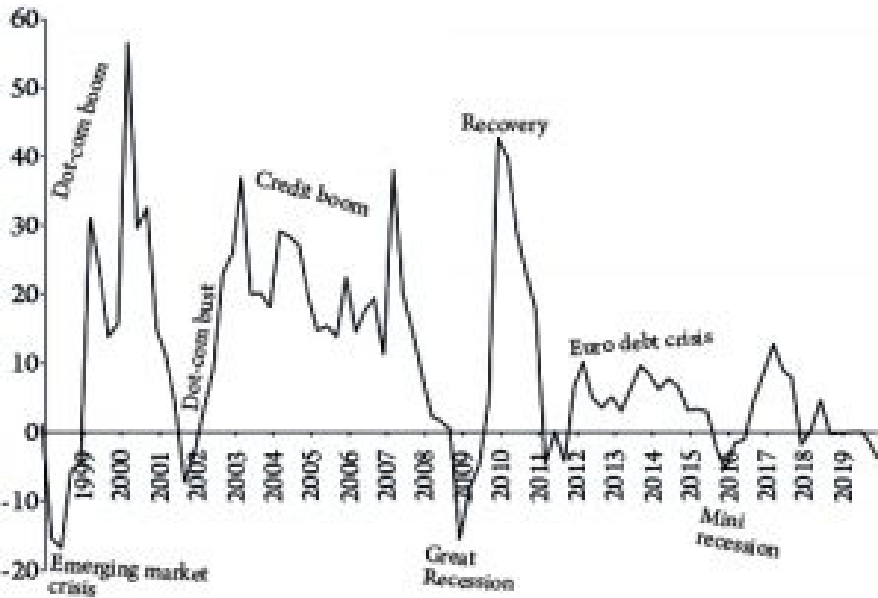
The profitability of capital in the major economies has been on a downward trend. Moreover, the mass of global profits was also beginning to contract before COVID-19 exploded onto the scene. So even if the virus does not trigger a slump, the conditions for any significant recovery are just not there.



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23 Dillow, 2020

Global corporate profits from six major economies (weighted mean, percentage year on year, Q4 2019 partially estimated)

Source: National statistics, author's calculation



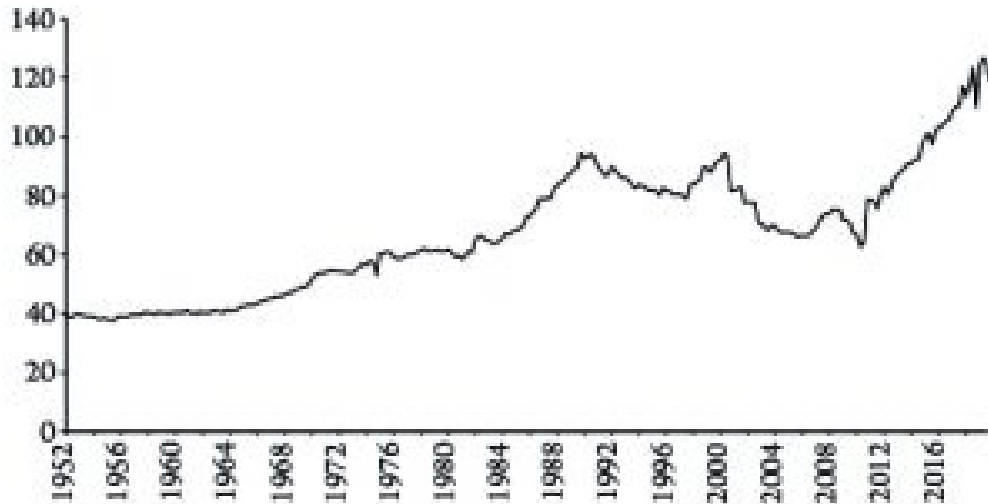
Then there is debt. Over the past decade, characterised by record low, or even negative, interest rates, companies have been on a borrowing binge. Everywhere corporate debt has soared during the long and weak “expansion” since 2009. Huge debt, particularly in the corporate sector, is a recipe for a serious crash if the profitability of capital drops sharply. According to the IIF, the ratio of global debt to gross domestic product hit an all-time high of over 322%, close to \$253 trillion, in the third quarter of 2019. The rise in US non-financial corporate debt is particularly striking.

This has enabled large global tech companies to buy up their own shares and issue huge dividends to shareholders, while piling up cash abroad to avoid tax. It has also allowed small and medium-sized companies in the US, Europe, and Japan, which have not been making any profits worth speaking of for years, to survive in what has been called a “zombie state”, making just enough to pay their workers, buy inputs and service their (rising) debt, but without having anything left over for new investment and expansion. A recent OECD report said that, by the end of December 2019, the global outstanding stock of non-financial corporate bonds had reached an all-time high of \$13.5 trillion, double the level reached in real terms in December 2008. The rise is most striking in the US, where the Federal Reserve estimates that corporate debt had risen from \$3.3 trillion before the financial crisis to \$6.5 trillion last year. Given that Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, and Google parent Alphabet alone held net cash at the end of last year of \$328 billion, this suggests that much of

the debt is concentrated in old economic sectors where many companies are less cash generative than big tech. Debt servicing is thus more burdensome.²⁴

US non-financial corporate debt to net worth (percentage)

Source: US Federal Reserve.



The IMF's latest Global Financial Stability report amplifies this point with a simulation showing that a recession half as severe as that in 2009 would result in companies with \$19 trillion of outstanding debt having insufficient profits to service that debt.²⁵ So if sales should collapse, supply chains be disrupted and profitability fall further, these heavily indebted companies could keel over. That would hit credit markets and banks, triggering a financial collapse.

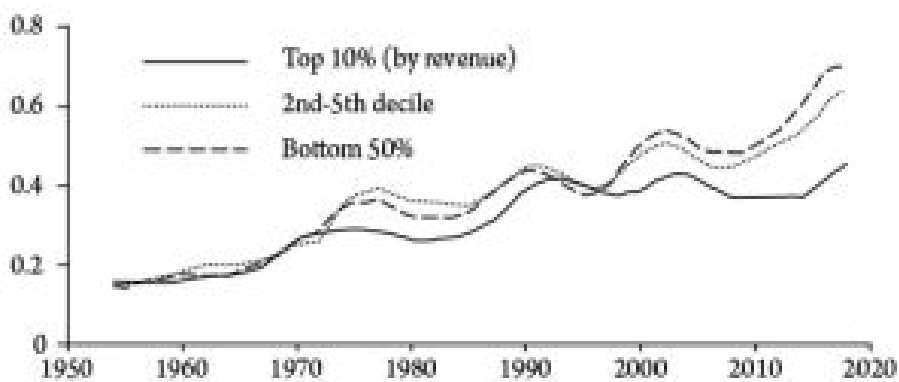
A recent paper by Joseph Baines and Sandy Brian Hager starkly reveals all. For decades, capitalists have been switching from investing in productive assets to investing in financial assets — “fictitious capital”, as Marx called it. Stock buybacks and dividend payments to shareholders have been the order of the day rather than re-investing profits in new technology to boost labour productivity. This mainly applies to larger US companies. A vast swathe of small US firms were already in trouble. For them, profit margins have already been falling. As a result, the overall profitability of US capital has fallen, particularly since the late 1990s. Baines and Hager argue that “the dynamics of shareholder capitalism have pushed the firms in the lower echelons of the US corporate hierarchy into a state of financial distress.” As a result, corporate debt has risen,

²⁴ Plender, 2020

²⁵ IMF, 2020.

not only in absolute dollar terms, but also relative to revenue, particularly for the smaller companies. Everything has been held together because the interest on corporate debt has fallen significantly, keeping debt servicing costs down. Even so, smaller companies are paying out interest at a much higher level than the large companies. Since the 1990s, their debt servicing costs have held more or less steady but they are nearly twice as high as for the top 10%. Now the days of cheap credit could be over, despite the Federal Reserve's desperate attempt to keep borrowing costs down. Corporate debt yields have rocketed during this pandemic crisis. A wave of debt defaults is now on the agenda. That could “send shockwaves through already-jittery financial markets, providing a catalyst for a wider meltdown”.²⁶

Debt to revenue ratio of US non-financial firms, WRDS Compustat data



When the optimists talk about a quick V-shaped recovery, they are simply not recognising that COVID-19 is not generating a “normal” recession, and it is not hitting just a single region but the entire global economy. Many companies, particularly smaller ones, will not return after the pandemic. Before the lockdowns, there were anything between 10 to 20% of firms in the US and Europe that were barely making enough profit to cover running costs and debt servicing. These “zombie firms” may find the “Cape Cod winter” will be the final nail in their coffins. Several middling retail and leisure chains have already filed for bankruptcy, and airlines and travel agencies may follow. Large numbers of shale oil companies are also struggling. As financial analyst Mohamed El-Erian concludes: “Debt is already proving to be a dividing line for firms racing to adjust to the crisis, and a crucial factor in a competition of survival of the fittest. Companies that came into the crisis highly indebted will have a harder time continuing. If you emerge from this, you will emerge to a landscape where a lot of your competitors have disappeared.”²⁷

²⁶ Baines and Hager, 2020.

²⁷ El-Erian, 2020

The mainstream policy reaction

Yet these cash packages are new. Straight cash handouts by the –government to households and firms are, in effect, what the infamous monetarist economist Milton Friedman called “helicopter money”, i.e., dollars to be dropped from the sky. Forget the banks; get the money directly into the hands of those who need it and who will spend it. Post-Keynesian economists who have pushed for helicopter money, or “people’s money” as they would prefer it, are thus apparently vindicated.²⁸

In addition, an idea long excluded by mainstream policy has now become acceptable: fiscal spending financed not by the issue of more debt (government bonds) but by simply “printing money” (that is, by a central bank depositing money in the government’s account). The policies of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) have arrived. This “monetary financing” is supposed to be temporary and limited, but supporters of MMT are cock-a-hoop, hoping that it could become permanent, as they advocate. Under this approach governments simply create money and spend to take the economy towards full employment and keep it there. Capitalism will be saved by the state and by MMT.²⁹ The problem with this approach is that it ignores the crucial factor: the social structure of capitalism. Under capitalism, production and investment is for profit, not to meet the needs of people. Profit, in turn, depends on the ability to exploit the working class sufficiently compared to the costs of investment in technology and productive assets. It does not depend on whether the government has provided enough “effective demand”.

Michael Pettis, a well-known “balance sheet” macro-economist based in Beijing, challenges the optimistic assumption that printing money for increased government spending can do the trick: “If the government can spend these additional funds in ways that make GDP grow faster than debt, politicians don’t have to worry about runaway inflation or the piling up of debt. But if this money isn’t used productively, the opposite is true.” He adds: “creating or borrowing money does not increase a country’s wealth unless doing so results directly or indirectly in an increase in productive investment... If US companies are reluctant to invest not because the cost of capital is high but rather because expected profitability is low, they are unlikely to respond to the trade-off between cheaper capital and lower demand by investing more”.³⁰ You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink.

The historical evidence shows that the so-called Keynesian multiplier has limited effect in restoring growth, mainly because it is not the consumer who matters in reviving the economy but capitalist companies.³¹ There is little reason to believe that it will be more effective this time round. A recent study argues that a quick recovery from this pandemic is unlikely because

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²⁸ Coppola, 2020.

²⁹ For a Marxist critique of MMT, see Roberts, 2019b.

³⁰ Pettis, 2019

³¹ Roberts, 2012.

“demand is endogenous and affected by the supply shock and other features of the economy.” This suggests that traditional fiscal stimulus is less effective in a recession caused by a supply shock. Demand may indeed overreact to the supply shock, leading to a demand-deficient recession, because of “low substitutability across sectors and incomplete markets, with liquidity constrained consumers.” But this means that “various forms of fiscal policy, per dollar spent, may be less effective”.³²

But what else can governments do, and what else can mainstream economists recommend? If the social structure of capitalist economies is to remain untouched, then all you are left with is printing money and raising government spending.

A social economy

However, there is an alternative. Once the current lockdowns end, what is needed to revive output, investment, and employment is something like a “war economy” or, more accurately, a “social economy”. The slump can only be reversed with massive government investment, public ownership of strategic sectors, and state direction of the productive sectors of the economy. Andrew Bossie and JW Mason outline the experience of the public sector role in the wartime US economy. They show that all sorts of loan guarantees, tax incentives, and other measures were initially offered by the Franklin Roosevelt administration to the capitalist sector. But it soon became clear that the capitalists could not do the job of delivering on the war effort because they would not invest or boost capacity without profit guarantees. Direct public investment took over and government-ordered direction was imposed. Bossie and Mason find that federal spending rose from about 8-10% of GDP during the 1930s to an average of around 40% of GDP from 1942 to 1945. Most significantly, contract spending on goods and services accounted for 23% of GDP on average during the war. Currently in most capitalist economies public sector investment is about 3% of GDP, while capitalist sector investment is 15% or more. In the war that ratio was reversed.³³

What happened was a massive rise in government investment and spending. In 1940, private sector investment was still below the level of 1929 and actually fell further during the war. So the state sector took over nearly all investment, as resources (value) were diverted to the production of arms and other security measures in a war economy. John Maynard Keynes himself said that the war economy demonstrated that, “it is, it seems, politically impossible for a capitalistic democracy to organise expenditure on the scale necessary to make the grand experiments which would prove my case—except in war conditions”.³⁴

The war economy of 1941-5 did not stimulate the private sector; it replaced the “free market” and investment for profit. To organise the war

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³² Guerrieri and others, 2020

³³ Bossie and Mason, 2020.

³⁴ Cited in Renshaw, 1999

economy and to ensure that it produced the goods needed for war, the Roosevelt government spawned an array of mobilisation agencies that not only often purchased goods but closely directed their manufacture and heavily influenced the operation of private companies and whole industries. Bossie and Mason conclude that: “The more—and faster—the economy needs to change, the more planning it needs. More than at any other period in US history, the wartime economy was a planned economy. The massive, rapid shift from civilian to military production required far more conscious direction than the normal process of economic growth. The national response to the coronavirus and the transition away from carbon will also require higher than normal degrees of economic planning by government.”³⁵

Another leg in the Long Depression

In the absence of this, far from a quick snap back in the world capitalist economy when the lockdowns end, the prospect is for another leg in the “Long Depression”, characterised by low output, investment, and income growth. After the Great Recession when growth resumed, it was at a slower rate than before. Since 2009, US per capita GDP annual growth has averaged 1.6%. At the end of 2019, per capita GDP was 13% below trend growth prior to 2008. At the end of the 2008-9 recession, it was 9% below trend. So, in spite of a decade-long expansion, the US economy has fallen further below trend since the Great Recession ended. The gap is now equal to a permanent loss of income of \$10,200 per person. In this pandemic slump, Goldman Sachs is forecasting a drop in per capita GDP that will wipe out all the “gains” of the past ten years. The massive spending by the US Congress and the huge Federal Reserve monetary stimulus won’t stop this deep slump or even get the US economy back to its previous (low) trend.

An economic recession can lead to “scarring”—long-lasting damage to the economy. IMF economists have noted that after recessions there is not always a V-shaped recovery. Indeed, it has been often the case that the previous growth trend is never re-established. Using updated data from 1974 to 2012, they found that irreparable damage to output is not limited to financial and political crises. All types of recessions, on average, tend to lead to permanent output losses. That does not just apply to a single economy; it also affects the gap between rich and poor economies: “Poor countries suffer deeper and more frequent recessions and crises, each time suffering permanent output losses and losing ground.”³⁶

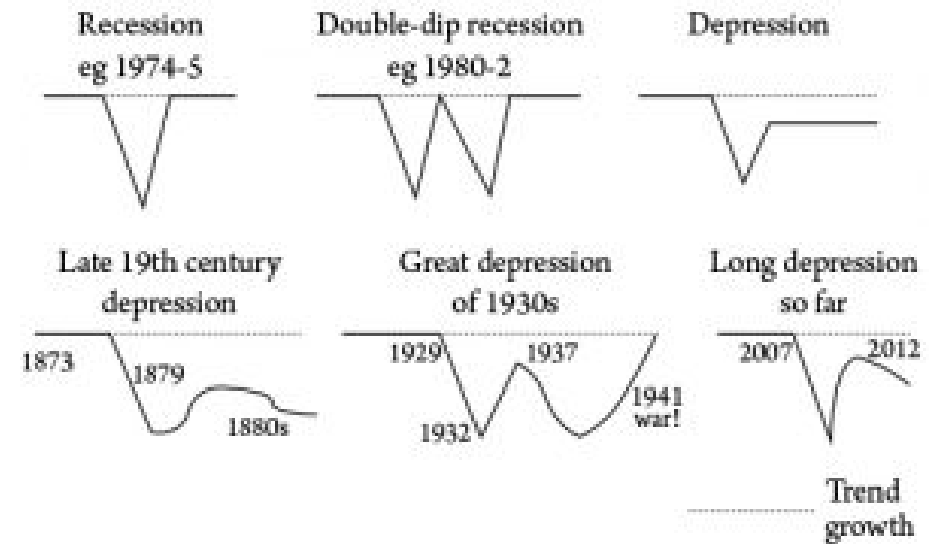
Their paper complements my view of the difference between “classic” recessions and depressions.³⁷ In depressions, the recovery after a slump takes the form, not of a V-shape, but more of a reversed square root shape, which sets an economy on a new and lower trajectory.

³⁵ Bossie and Mason, op cit

³⁶ Cerra and Saxena, 2018.

³⁷ I discuss this in depth in Roberts, 2016

Schematic representation of the shape of various recessions



Perhaps the depth and reach of this pandemic slump will create conditions where capital values are so devalued by bankruptcies, closures, and layoffs that weaker capitalist companies will be liquidated and more successful, technologically advanced companies will take over in an environment of higher profitability. This would be the classic cycle of boom, slump, and boom that Marxist theory suggests. However, the past ten years have been more similar to the period of crisis in the late 19th century. Now it seems that any recovery from the pandemic slump will be drawn out and so deliver an expansion that is below the previous trend for years to come. It will be another leg in the long depression we have experienced for the past ten years.

The story of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the war that followed shows us that, once capitalism is in the grip of a long depression, there must be a grinding destruction of the capital accumulated in previous decades before a new era of expansion becomes possible. There is no policy that can avoid that and preserve the capitalist sector. If the required capital destruction does not happen this time, then the Long Depression that the world capitalist economy has suffered since the Great Recession could enter another decade. The major economies (let alone the so-called emerging economies) will struggle to come out of this slump unless the law of the market and of value is replaced by public ownership, investment, and planning, utilising all the skills and resources of working people. This pandemic has shown that.

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Excerpt from: The Ministry for the Future¹

Kim Stanley Robinson

He was having panic attacks whenever he got hot, and then the panic attacks made him hotter still. Feedback loop for sure. When he was stabilized enough to move him, we flew him to Glasgow. He had spent a year abroad there, he said, and we thought that familiarity might help. He didn't want to go home to the States. So we took him to Glasgow and kept him cool, and took walks with him around the neighborhood at night. It was October and so the usual rain and raw sea air. That seemed to comfort him.

One night I was out there walking the streets with him, letting him take the lead. He hardly ever said a word, and I let him be. On this night he was a little more talkative. He pointed out to me where he had gone to school, theaters he had frequented. Apparently he had taken an interest in theater, done some work backstage with lighting and sets and costumes. Then when we found ourselves on Clyde Street, he wanted to walk out onto the pedestrian bridge that ran out over the river to the south bank.

Out there in the dark the city looked foursquare and massive. It's low for a city, not much different than it must have appeared a century or two ago. A little uncanny somehow, like a city in some dark fantasy. He stood there and looked down at the black water, elbows on the railing.

We talked about various things. At one point I asked him again if he would be going home. No, he said sharply. I'm never going back there. It was the blackest look I ever saw on him. *Never*, he said.

I let it go. I didn't want to ask. We stood there leaning against the railing. It looked like the city was slowly floating in toward the hills.

So why did I survive? he said all of a sudden. Why just me, out of all those people?

I didn't know what to say. You just did, I said. Probably you were the healthiest person there. Maybe one of the biggest, I don't know. You aren't that big, but maybe bigger than most Indians.

He shrugged. Not really.

Even a bit more body mass would help. You have to keep your core temperature under about 104. A few pounds could help with that. And a lifetime of better food and medical care. And you're a runner, right?

I was a swimmer.

That probably helped. Stronger heart, thinner blood. That sort of thing. Ultimately I think it just means you were the strongest person there, and only the strongest survived.

I don't think I was the strongest person there.

Well, maybe you were better hydrated? Or you stayed in the water more? They said they found you by the lake.

¹The present work comprises a few chapters from Robinsons forthcoming novel *The Ministry for the Future*. We are grateful to Kim Stan Robinson for generously offering us these portions, as well as to Ellen Wright from Orbit publisher for the permission to print these chapters.

Yes, he said. Something I said had troubled him. He said, I did stay submerged as much as I could. Just my face up there to breathe, all night long. But a lot of people were doing that.

It added up to survival, I said. You made it. You were lucky.

Don't say that.

I don't mean lucky. It was chance. I mean there's always an element of chance.

He looked at the dark low city, spangled with its night lights. It's just fate, he said. He put his forehead on the railing.

I put a hand on his shoulder. Fate, I agreed.

Humans are burning about 40 gigatons (a gigaton is a billion tons) of fossil carbon per year. Scientists have calculated that we can burn about 500 more gigatons of fossil carbon before we push the average global temperature over 2 degrees Celsius higher than it was when the industrial revolution began; this is as high as we can push it, they calculate, before really dangerous effects will follow for most of Earth's bioregions, meaning also food production for people

Some used to question how dangerous the effects would be. But already more of the sun's energy stays in the Earth system than leaves it by about 0.7 of a watt per square meter of the Earth's surface. This means an inexorable rise in average temperatures. And a wet-bulb temperature of 35 will kill humans, even if unclothed and sitting in the shade; the combination of heat and humidity prevents sweating from dissipating heat, and death by hyperthermia soon results. And wet-bulb temperatures of 34 have been recorded since the year 1990, once in Chicago. So the danger seems evident enough.

Thus, 500 gigatons; but meanwhile, the fossil fuels industry has already located at least 3,000 gigatons of fossil carbon in the ground. All these concentrations of carbon are listed as assets by the corporations that have located them, and they are regarded as national resources by the nationstates in which they have been found. Only about a quarter of this carbon is owned by private companies; the rest is in the possession of various nation-states. The notional value of the 2,500 gigatons of carbon that should be left in the ground, calculated by using the current price of oil, is on the order of 1,500 trillion US dollars.

It seems quite possible that these 2,500 gigatons of carbon might eventually come to be regarded as a kind of stranded asset, but in the meantime, some people will be trying to sell and burn the portion of it they own or control, while they still can. Just enough to make a trillion or two, they'll be saying to themselves—not the crucial portion, not the burn that pushes us over the edge, just one last little taking. People need it.

The nineteen largest organizations doing this will be, in order of size from biggest to smallest: Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, ExxonMobil, National Iranian Oil Company, BP, Royal Dutch Shell, Pemex, Petróleos de Venezuela, PetroChina, Peabody Energy, ConocoPhillips,

Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Iraq National Oil Company, Total SA, Sonatrach, BHP Billiton, and Petrobras

Executive decisions for these organizations' actions will be made by about five hundred people. They will be good people. Patriotic politicians, concerned for the fate of their beloved nation's citizens; conscientious hard-working corporate executives, fulfilling their obligations to their board and their shareholders. Men, for the most part; family men for the most part: well-educated, well-meaning. Pillars of the community. Givers to charity. When they go to the concert hall of an evening, their hearts will stir at the somber majesty of Brahms's Fourth Symphony. They will want the best for their children.

Down in Zurich's Niederdorf, the old medieval district bordering the east side of the Limmat under the tower of the Grossmünster, Zwingli's austere warehouse of a cathedral, there were still some little bars tucked here and there, too stodgy to attract many tourists. Not that Zurich got many tourists in November. Rain was turning into sleet, and the old black cobbles in their pattern of overlapping fans were getting slippery. Mary Murphy glanced down a broader street that led to the river; there stood the construction crane that wasn't really a construction crane but rather a work of art, a sculptor's joke at the ubiquity of cranes in Zurich. The city was always rebuilding itself.

In one of the smallest bars she sat down with Badim Bahadur, her chief of staff, who was hunched over a whisky reading his phone. He nodded at her in a morose greeting, pushed the ice around in his glass.

"What's the word from Delhi?" she said as she sat across from him.

"It's to start tomorrow."

She nodded at the waiter, pointed at Badim's drink. Another whisky. "What's the reaction?"

"Bad." He shrugged. "Maybe Pakistan will bomb us, and we'll retaliate, and that will start a nuclear winter. That will cool the planet quite nicely!"

"I should think the Pakistanis would want this as much as anyone, or even more. A heat wave like the one that just happened could kill everyone there."

"They know that. They're just piling on. China is doing it too. We are now the pariah of the world, all for doing the needful. We're getting killed for getting killed."

"It's always that way."

"Is it?" He glanced out the window. "I don't notice Europe hurting too badly."

"This is Switzerland, not Europe. The Swiss stay out of shit like this, they always have. That's what you're seeing here."

"Is it so different in the rest of Europe?"

"They killed Greece for getting killed, remember? And the rest of southern Europe isn't doing much better. Ireland neither for that matter.

We got killed by the Brits for centuries. Something like a quarter of all the Irish died in the famine, and about as many left the island. That was something."

"Post-colonials," Badim said.

"Yes. And of the same empire too. It's funny how England never seemed to pay too much of a price for its crimes."

"No one does. You pay for being the victim, not the criminal."

Her whisky arrived and she downed half of it. "We're going to have to figure out how to change that."

"If there is a way."

"Justice?"

Badim made a skeptical face. "What is that?"

"Come on, don't be cynical."

"No, I mean it. Consider the Greek goddess of justice. Bronze woman in a toga, with a blindfold covering her eyes to make her be fair. Her scales held up to measure the balance of crime and punishment, no consideration given to individual influence. But nothing ever really balances in those scales. If it's an eye for an eye, maybe. That will balance out. But if someone is killed, no. The murderer gets fined, or jailed for life—is that a real balance? No." "And thus capital punishment."

"Which everyone agrees is barbaric. Because if killing is wrong, two wrongs don't make a right. And violence begets violence. So you try to find some equivalent, and nothing is equivalent. So the scales are never balanced. Particularly if one nation murders another nation for three centuries, takes all its goods and then says Oh, sorry—bad idea. We'll stop and all is well. But all is not well."

"Maybe India can get England to pay for this casting of dust."

He shrugged. "It costs like ten euros. I don't see why everyone isn't supporting it one hundred percent. The effect will only last three or four years at most, and during that time we can see what it does, and decide whether we should keep doing it or not."

"Lots of people think it will have knock-on effects."

"Like what?"

"You know them as well as I. If doing this stops the monsoon, you'll have doubled your own misery."

"So we decided to risk it! After that it's no one else's business."

"But it'll be a worldwide effect."

"Everyone wants the temperatures lowered."

"Not Russia."

"I'm not so sure. The sea ice is melting and the permafrost is thawing, that's half their country. If their rivers don't freeze, Siberia has no roads for nine months of the year. They're made for the cold there, they know that."

"There's cold and cold," Mary said.

"But it's colder than ever there, sometimes! You know that. No.

They're just piling on, like everyone else. Someone takes the bull by the horns, grabs the wolf by the ears, and everyone takes that opportunity to stick knives in his back. I'm sick of it."

She took another sip. "Welcome to the world," she said.

"Well I don't like it." He downed his drink. "So what are we going to do? We're the Ministry for the Future. We have to take a stand on this."

"I know. We'll have to see what our scientists say about it first."

He gave her a look.

"They will prevaricate."

"Well, they don't know enough now to make a considered judgment.

So they'll say it's a good experiment, that we should run it and wait a decade and see what happens."

"As usual!"

"But that's science, right?"

"But we have to do more than the usual!"

"We'll say that. And I'm sure we'll end up backing India."

"With money?"

"Ten euros, sure! Cash on the barrel."

He laughed despite himself. But quickly his expression darkened.

"It isn't enough," he said. "What we're doing with this ministry. I'm telling you, it isn't enough."

Mary regarded him closely. This was a reproach. And he wasn't meeting her eye.

"Let's go for a walk," she suggested. "I've been sitting all day."

He didn't object. They polished off their drinks, paid and walked out into the twilight. Down to the crane statue and then upstream by the Limmat in its stone channel, the black surface of water sheeting past them, cracking the light reflected from the other side. Past the old stone cube of the Rathaus; as always, Mary marvelled that the entire city government could have been stuffed into such a small building. Then past the Odeon and across the big bridge spanning the lake outlet, to the tiny park on the other side, where the statue of Ganymede stood, his uplifted hand seeming to hold up the moon, low over the Zurichsee. This was a place she often came to; something in the statue, the lake, the Alps far to the south, combined in a way she found stirring, she couldn't say why. Zurich—life—she couldn't say. The world seemed a big place when she was here.

"Listen," she said to Badim. "Maybe you're right. Maybe there's no such thing as justice, in the sense of some kind of real reparation of a wrong. No eye for an eye, no matter what. Especially historical justice, or climate justice. But over the long haul, in some rough sense, that's what we have to try for. That's what our ministry is about. We're trying to set things up so that in the future, over the long haul, something like justice will get created. Some long-term ledger of more good than bad. Bending the arc and all that. No matter what happened before, that's what we can do now."

She pointed at Ganymede, holding his back hand aloft. The moon lay right there in it, as if he were about to throw it across the sky.

Badim sighed. "I know," he said. "I'm here to try." And the look in his eye—distant, intense, calculating, cold—told Mary that he would. It made her shiver to see it.

More relaxing for Mary, even entertaining, were her meetings with Tatiana Voznesenskaya, head of the ministry's legal division. They were in the habit of meeting on some mornings at the Utoquai schwimmbad, and if it was warm enough, changing into their bathing suits and swimming out into the lake, freestyling in tandem and then chatting as they did the breaststroke for a while, circling out there, looking at the city from that strange low offshore angle; then back in to shower and sit in the schwimmbad café over hot drinks. Tatiana was tall and dark, dramatic in that Russian way of pale blue eyes and fashion model cheekbones, of grim high spirits and fuligin black humor. She had gotten pretty high in the Russian state department before running afoul of some part of the power structure there and deciding she would be better off in an international agency. Her expertise in Russia had been international treaty law, which she now brought to bear in working to find allies and legal means to advance the cause of defending the generations to come. This she felt was mostly a matter of establishing situations where these generations to come were given legal standing, such that their currently existing lawyers could file suits and be heard by courts. Not easy, given the reluctance of any court to grant standing to anyone or anything outside the magic circle of the law as written. But Tatiana had experience with most of the alreadyexisting international courts, and was now working with the Network of Institutions for Future Generations, and the Children's Trust, and many other groups, all to leverage the power given to the ministry by its origins in the Paris Agreement. Mary often felt that it was really Tatiana who should have been made the head of the ministry, that Mary's experience in Ireland and the UN had been rather lightweight compared to Tatiana's tough career.

Tatiana had waved this off when Mary once mentioned the thought over drinks. "No you are perfect! Nice Irish girl, everyone loves you! I would wreck everything at once, bashing around like a KGB thug. Which I am," she added with a dangerous glint in her eye.

"Not really," Mary said.

"No, not really. But I would wreck things. We need you at the top, getting us in the door. It's similar to legal standing, really. Less formal but just as important. You have to get people to listen to you before you can make your case. That's what you do—people listen to you. Then we can go to work."

"I hope so. Do you really think we can get significant legal standing for people who don't exist yet?"

"I'm not sure. On the one hand, the circle of inclusion has been

growing over historical time, which is a kind of precedent. More kinds of people given standing, even ecologies given standing, as in Ecuador. It sets a pattern, and logically it holds water. But even if we succeed in that part, we have a second problem, maybe bigger, in the weakness of international courts generally."

"Do you think they're weak?"

Tatiana gave Mary a sharp look, as if to say Please be serious. "Nations agree to them only if they like their judgments. But judgments always side with one side or other, so the losing side is never pleased. And there is no sheriff for the world. So, the US does what it wants, and the rest of us also do what we want. The courts only work when some petty war criminal gets caught and everyone decides to look virtuous."

Mary nodded unhappily. The Indians' flouting of the Paris Agreement with their geoengineering, not much different legally than the general disregard for the Agreement's emission reduction targets, was just the latest example of this kind of behavior. "So what do you think we can do to improve that situation?"

Tatiana shrugged. "Rule of law is all we've got," she said darkly. "We tell people that and then try to make them believe it."

"How do we do that?"

"If the world blows up they'll believe it. That's why we got the international order we got after World War Two."

"Not good enough?" Mary suggested.

"No, but nothing is ever good enough. We just make do." Tatiana brightened, although Mary saw the sly look that indicated a joke: "We make a new religion! Some kind of Earth religion, everyone family, universal brotherhood."

"Universal sisterhood," Mary said. "An Earth mother religion."

"Exactly," Tatiana said, and laughed. "As it should be, right?"

They toasted the idea. "Write up the laws for that," Mary said. "Have them ready for when the time comes."

"Of course," Tatiana said. "I have entire constitution already, in here." And she tapped her forehead.

We took off from Bihta and Darbhanga and INS Garuda and Gandhinagar, mostly in Ilyushin IL-78s, bought long ago from the Soviet Union. We had some Boeing and Airbus refuelers too. They were old planes, and it was very cold inside them. Our suits were old too, they were hard to move in, and hardly anything as insulation. We got very cold up there, but the flights were relatively short.

We flew to sixty thousand feet, as high as the planes could get. Higher would have been better but we couldn't do it. It took a couple of hours, as we always carried a maximum load. Two planes got caught in the so-called coffin corner and stalled catastrophically, and one of the crews didn't get out.

Once up there we deployed the fuel lines and pumped the aerosols into the air. The plumes looked like dumped fuel at first, but they were really aerosol particulates, we were told mostly sulfur dioxide and then some other chemicals, like from a volcano, but there wasn't ash like in a volcanic explosion, it was a mix made to stay up there and reflect sunlight. Manufactured at Bhopal and elsewhere in India.

We flew most of our missions over the Arabian Sea, so the prevailing winds of late summer would carry the stuff over India before anywhere else. We wanted that, it was for us we were doing it, and some felt we might also avoid some criticism by doing it that way. But soon enough what we released would get carried by the winds all over the stratosphere, mostly in the northern hemisphere but eventually everywhere. There it would be deflecting some sunlight.

Even in India you could hardly see any difference in the sky. For all our lives we were living under the ABC, the Asian Brown Cloud, so we were used to dusty skies. Our operation only made things a little whiter by day, and the sunsets were sometimes more red than before. Quite beautiful on certain days. But mostly things looked the same. The sunlight we deflected to space was said to be about a fifth of one percent of the total incoming. Very important crucial stuff, but it's not really possible to see a difference that small.

Global effect was said to be like Pinatubo's eruption in 1991, or some said a double Pinatubo. The total release was taken to the stratosphere in several thousand individual missions. We had a fleet of only two hundred planes, so we each went up scores and scores of times, spread out over seven months. That was a lot of work. Of course it was a pretty small effort as these things go. And if it helped to prevent another heat wave, it was worth doing.

We knew the Chinese hated the idea, and Pakistan of course, and although we flew only when the jet streams were running toward the east or northeast, there were times when those countries lay in the path of dispersion. And all over the world people pointed out that the ozone layer would get hurt, which would be bad for everyone. Once a heat-seeking missile flew right by our plane, Vikram dodged it at the last minute, the plane squealed like a cat. No one ever found out who shot it at us. But we didn't care. We did what we were told, we were happy to do it. Everyone had lost someone they knew in the heat wave. Even if they hadn't, it was India. And it could happen again, anywhere in India and really anywhere in the world. As our officials told people, over and over. Even farther north a heat wave could strike. Europe once suffered one that killed seventy thousand people, even though Europe is so far north. Well more than half the land on Earth is at risk. So we did it.

Day after day for seven months. And round-the-clock, what with maintenance and refueling, and the filling of the tanks. It was a routine that took many thousands of people working together. We got tired,

exhausted, but also we got into the rhythm of it. There were enough crews to fly once out of every three missions per plane. For many weeks in the middle of it, it felt like it would go on forever. That it was all we were ever meant to do. We felt like we were saving India, and maybe saving the world. But it was India we were concerned with. No more deadly heat waves. So we hoped. It was a very emotional time.

Now, if I go anywhere in the world, and if someone speaks against what we did, I challenge them. You don't know anything, I tell them. It wasn't your people, so you don't care. But we know and we care. And there hasn't been a heat wave like that since. One may come again, no doubt of that, but we did what we could. We did the right thing. I must admit, I sometimes shout at people if they deny that. I damn them to hell. Which is a place we in India have already seen. So I have no patience for people who object to what we did. They don't know what they're talking about. They haven't seen it, and we have.

Ideology, n. An imaginary relationship to a real situation. In common usage, what the other person has, especially when systematically distorting the facts. But it seems to us that an ideology is a necessary feature of cognition, and if anyone were to lack one, which we doubt, they would be badly disabled. There is a real situation, that can't be denied, but it is too big for any individual to know in full, and so we must create our understanding by way of an act of the imagination. So we all have an ideology, and this is a good thing. So much information pours into the mind, ranging from sensory experience to discursive and mediated inputs of all kinds, that some kind of personal organizing system is necessary to make sense of things in ways that allow one to decide and to act. Worldview, philosophy, religion, these are all synonyms for ideology as defined above; and so is science, although it's the different one, the special one, by way of its perpetual cross-checking with reality tests of all kinds, and its continuous sharpening of focus. That surely makes science central to a most interesting project, which is to invent, improve, and put to use an ideology that explains in a coherent and useful way as much of the blooming buzzing inrush of the world as possible. What one would hope for in an ideology is clarity and explanatory breadth, and power. We leave the proof of this as an exercise for the reader.

The Normalization of Barbarism

Natalia Romé

Abstract: The circumstances of the pandemic, as well as the responses it provokes, are an opportunity to take up again an analysis of the so-called neoliberalism in the terms of the materialistic theory of ideology; which implies its consideration from the point of view of social reproduction; that is, from the question of the duration of an order of relations in the framework of a complex conception of historical temporality. On this theoretical basis, this article proposes to think about the melancholic, totalitarian and segregationist aspects of the neo-liberal regime of temporality, identified as "presentism", as an overdetermined effect of the agonising crisis of the regime of imperialist accumulation and its humanist ideological tendencies. From this point of view, one of the risks of the present crisis is the consolidation of a tendency towards the normalisation of barbarism.

Keywords: Pandemic, Imperialism, Segregationism, Ideology, Plural Temporality, Presentism.

I. Three scenes for a long lasting dystopia

"Anyone can see the future, it's like a serpent's egg" - the obscure Dr. Vergerus said to Abel, in the final minutes of Bergman's famous film, which portrays like no other the experience of impending horror. Dedicated to the German situation in the 1920s, "The Serpent's Egg" offered a painting and even the scent of the varied - but equally desperate - ways in which the Germans witnessed the gestation of Nazism.

In a film entitled "Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb", Stanley Kubric portrays, in a different but nevertheless eloquent manner, the experience of another impending disaster at the height of the Cold War, that of the atomic bomb. The horror is then elaborated in a different way, less dramatic but equally tragic. It no longer seems to be a question of discovering the origins of the evil but of accepting the nonsense of a chain of misunderstandings, vanities and suspicions that can end up in the explosion of the world. Leaving aside all ethical questions, the film leaves the causes of destruction on the side of imbecility and frivolity. But it also offers another singular detail that masterfully portrays the sensitivity that marks the opening of our era: instead of portraying the experience of inexorable danger in the form of a more or less expected assault, the film portrays the resignation to its already occurred temporality, the Bomb is no longer a threat, somehow the film assumes from the beginning that the "red button" has already been pressed.

Just two years ago, the Spanish newspaper El País headlined with the suggestive phrase "Fear is my fuel", an interview with Steven Spielberg about "Ready Player One: the game begins", dedicated to offering us a new dystopia about the effects of virtual alienation and

the compulsive use of networks. The film's trailer puts it on the table: "There's nowhere to go", resigns the protagonist who presents himself as part of a generation of "disappeared" (virtual) people. The world that was dreamt of as unlimited for the adventure of human progress has become a total space, closed in on itself, condemned to permanent recycling.

Since the imperialist wars of the early 20th century, the fact that "Humanity" is capable of annihilating itself has been a central feature of our mass culture, as much as of art, politics, science and philosophy.

Great narratives have been forged within this framework in which it is the imminence of its self-annihilation that makes Humanity exist as an illusory or desired global community. Multilateral credit institutions are as much a product of these paradoxes as are Human Rights. The 20th century witnessed the most violent modulations of this contradiction, which connects the ferocious and impiety expansion of the regime of imperialist accumulation with the various humanist ideological modulations. If this alliance finds its limits today, this does not seem to translate into any creative or transformative outburst but rather into an agonising and unlimited civilisational crisis that places us at the crossroads of a false option for conservationism -of "the human", "culture", "nature", as we conceived them- or the threat of a "future" that is paradoxically reactionary and ultraconservative.

The new dystopian narratives seem to symptomize a specific transformation in the ideological experience of historical time. The post-apocalyptic tone has been proliferating in the culture industry for years. But the crucial fact is that increasingly, their clichés go beyond the specific genre of science fiction and permeate the various public discourses, as a testimony of the reconfiguration of the social interpretations of the present, the imaginations of the common future and the passions (the fears and desires) with respect to them.

Science fiction has contributed in other moments to a social reflection, to a cultural and political criticism. It is enough to remember wonderful texts like those of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, but the pessimistic story does not seem to work in the same way anymore, it does not offer any strangeness in the complex of discursive processes, the dystopia is equally exercised by commercial publicity as by political discourses and liturgies of vigorous religiosities. Paradoxically, for our age so disbelieving, so relativistic and distrustful, this one certainty has become practically a dogma: "the future has arrived" therefore, "there is nowhere to go". In all cases the images of the apocalypse coincide with oppressive and circular scenarios, not only geographically, but especially closed to the future. Today's science fiction is the narrative of a world without a future, a massively consolidated discourse of resignation.

The various themes and the post-apocalyptic tone that proliferate in the cultural industry coexist in solidarity with the phantasmatic projection of absolute, all-powerful and quasi-transcendent knowledge

such as Big Data and with a series of practical doctrines of resignation and the administration of passions (fundamentally of fears). These elements reveal a certain tendency that dominates the ideological and discursive formations of our conjuncture.

And it is at this conjuncture that the COVID-19 pandemic "occurs". If we say that the new dystopian narratives seem to symptomize a specific transformation in the ideological experience of historical time, this is because it is not a question here of understanding ideological formations in terms of a few 'cultural contents', but in the strict materialistic terms of practices and rituals organized into apparatuses or material devices in which the organization of the experience of time is encoded in its dominant but contradictory tendencies.

Thus conceived, "dominant ideology" is the name of a regime of temporality that massively organizes the experience of the conjuncture, ordering-denying its heterogeneous and contradictory thickness of temporalities. In the dominant ideology the conjuncture finds the delimitation and the rhythms that homogenize its temporal plurality, the richness of its memories and its future. For this reason, the first task -and the permanent effort- of a critical interrogation of our present is precisely that of not subscribing to the melancholic and post-apocalyptic nature with which our present manifests itself to us, not surrendering to the evidence of the desperate emergence or to the withdrawn and contemplative waiting, but rather interrogating the material fabric in which the forms of the present sink their roots.

Considering the question in this way, it is not a great surprise to find those roots in the dominant form of the time supportive of humanist idealism, that made possible the consolidation of imperialist geopolitics on the old colonial traces.¹ We could say that in ideological terms, neoliberalism is the process of transformation of humanist idealism, its extreme deployment or its ominous reverse, exposed in the framework of the agonising crisis of the regime of imperialist accumulation in which it took its dominant tendency on a global scale.

...we have a natural tendency to *identify* imperialism with 'colonial' or 'neo-colonialist' conquest and aggression, with the pillaging and exploitation of the Third World. (...) But are we aware that imperialism operates first and foremost in the metropolitan countries, at metropolitan workers' expense? (...) When Lenin says that imperialism is the last stage of capitalism and that afterwards it's all over, we must realize: 1. that this last stage can last a long time; and; 2. that afterwards we will find ourselves facing an alternative; afterwards it is '*either socialism or barbarism*'. (...) What is barbarism? Regression while remaining in place, stagnation

.....
1 Cf. Wallerstein, 2011; Quijano, 1988; Mariátegui, 1928; Federici, 2004

while remaining in place, of a kind of which human history offers examples by the hundreds. Yes, our 'civilization' can perish in place, not only without rising to a higher 'stage' or sinking to a lower stage that has already existed, but in accumulating all the suffering of a childbirth that will not end, of a stillbirth that is not a delivery.²

Neoliberalism is the name of this barbarization of imperialist capitalism. That contemporaneity that dissolves real historical differences (and the contradictions that their coexistence entails) in a single, homogeneous time - to whose critique both Marx and Freud devoted themselves - constitutes the key to the ideological experience of humanist capitalism and acquires specific modulations in the various moments of the history of humanism. If until the beginning of the 20th century the dominant temporal modulation of social and subjective life subscribed to the progressive and teleological metaphor of the train, at this juncture that we can recognise as "neo-liberal" this allegory has become frayed, causing consequences that we have not yet been able to measure in its magnitude.

The particularities that we register today with respect to the specific social interpretations of the present, the weakening of the marks that sift history from the conflict of collective memories, or their capacities to elaborate the imaginations of the common future, account for a singular torsion in the very experience of time, which Fukuyama's famous ideologeme about the End of History, eloquently symptomizes. It is a torsion, we could say, in the regime of temporality that gave consistency to the Modern experience and support to its Subject. Within the framework of this inflection we are witnessing, we can only expect strong consequences in the various orders of subjective life and historical experience, which will shape the contradictions of the coming years and allow us to understand some of the sacrificial, authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies that can be read in the current scene as traces of a hesitation of our civilizing coordinates. Because this contradictory history of humanism is also the history of science and of the conflictive process of popular-democratic subjectivation in public space, and is the history of a competition between knowledge and thought, for leading the struggle of interpretations against superstition:

Superstition is not simply a false religion or a mistaken belief of things, but a political device, a machine of domination that separates men from what they can, that inhibits their political power and captures their imagination in sadness and melancholy - which is extreme anti-political passion; a totalitarian passion that affects the whole body. It is possible that what we today call "apathy" to

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2 Althusser 2018, pp.49-50

refer to a certain withdrawal from the public and a certain civil passivity would be thought by Spinoza to be a social melancholy.³

If the post-apocalyptic tone of the neoliberal "presentism" is, in this sense, nothing more than the suffocating ideological effect of the successful global homogenization of capital and the humanitarian disaster of its own humanist ideology, then it is time to think whether the belief in an inexorable disaster, which awaits us around the corner, is not a new form of superstition, with painful consequences for individual and collective life. It is also time to open up the questions regarding the historical conditions in which apocalyptic narratives have taken shape, in order to question ourselves more clearly about their consequences.

II. The lost time

In *Left-wing Melancholia* (2017), Enzo Traverso calls on E. Bloch to mark the differences of our present with respect to that time of the conjunction between theoretical thought and political imagination that we usually called "Marxism". The dialectical tension between the chimerical and promethean events that - according to Bloch - haunted the imagination of a society historically incapable of realizing them, and the anticipatory hopes that inspired a revolutionary transformation of the present, have been weakened. Today we observe, according to Traverso, the fading of the former and the metamorphosis of the latter: the various forms of science fiction, ecological studies and the dystopias of a future nightmare made up of environmental catastrophes, replaced the dream of a liberated humanity and confined the social imagination to the narrow limits of the present. Meanwhile, the concrete utopias of collective emancipation became increasingly individualized drives for the endless consumption of commodities.⁴

But the challenge presented to us by this transformation does not consist so much in discussing the political validity of the idea or image of the Revolution, rather in thinking about the modulations of the regime of historical temporality. Traverso defines it as "presentism" and characterizes it as a cyclical and expansive experience, which threatens to dissolve the contradictory temporal density of dialectics. The present as an impoverished time, is the result of a dialectic that has been suspended and replaced by the immediate demolition carried out by Capital against everything that resists its extended reproduction.⁵

The thought of that process makes its way through the midst of melancholy and faces the challenge of bringing about a mourning work

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3Tatián 2014, p.17, my translation

4Traverso 2017.

5 Ibid.

that will allow a rethinking of socialism in a time when its memory is lost. As Butler says, the experience of loss itself touches the common ground of damage: "Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and love, that we have struggle to find the conditions of our desire."⁶

But grief work also raises a question that Derrida formulated in rather disturbing terms: "How can one be late to the end of history? A question for today. It is serious because it obliges one to reflect again, as we have been doing since Hegel, on what happens and deserves the name of event, after history; it obliges one to wonder if the end of history is but the end of a certain concept of history."⁷

What can critical theory be in that circular time in which the experience of history is subtracted from the event? This question has been a feature of the theoretical debate on left wing thought since the 1980s, and has received countless contributions since then.⁸

The concept that, from the field of materialism, was forged to enunciate the problem of the operation of capture and impoverishment of the disadjusted plurality of historical time, in the blind and circular temporality of Capital, is the Marxist concept of ideology, especially in its Althusserian formulation, within the framework of a theory of the duration of a historical formation, that is, from the point of view of social reproduction.⁹

Althusser understands that the development of the materialist concept of history that Marxist theory opens, demands a critique of the teleological conception in which historical time is the projection, in the continuity of time, of the inner essence of the social totality, of which it is the existence. The problem is not only the evolutionist positivism that has been abundantly criticized by theorists such as Adorno or Benjamin, among others, but also the expressive causality that an idealistic conception of time implies. This is understood as a homogeneous continuity that is based on contemporaneity, which supposes a relationship of immediate coexistence without gaps between the elements of the historical totality.¹⁰ This temporality supposes that the relational complexity of social practices is redirected to an immediate existence in a contemporary present. The social totality is a spiritual totality; that is, a whole whose complexity is immediately organised around an inner principle that disregards the effectiveness

6 Butler 2004, p.20

7 Derrida 1994, p.17

8 Derrida, 1994; Blanchot, 1990; Badiou, 1998; Traverso, 2017

9 Althusser 1970/2013

10 Althusser 1970 [1965], p. 94

of the differences between its parts. That is why the continuity and contemporaneity of time is possible as a phenomenon of the continuity of the presence of the Idea in its positive determinations.¹¹

This homogeneous and contemporary temporality concerns the idealistic conception of politics since it is, for Althusser, the foundation of the Hegelian formula, according to which 'no one can jump over his time'.¹² The present constitutes the absolute horizon, "since all knowledge is nothing but the existence in knowledge of the inner principle of the whole."¹³ This metaphysics of the present forbids all knowledge that leads to the future and therefore makes political action unthinkable - says Althusser.¹⁴

Against what is usually thought, and even against many of Althusser's own formulations, his position does not result from a full rejection of Hegelian dialectics, but from the affirmation of an internal distance in its fabric, through the critique of the denial of the complex temporality subsumed in the idealistic temporality of the Absolute Present. The materialist position, understood as a belligerent intervention in the philosophical field, consists in an exercise of permanent restitution of the real differential plurality of temporalities, whose idealistic denial produces as an imaginary effect, the contemporaneity of historical time; that is, the impoverishment of the experience of the disadjusted, contradictory and heterogeneous condition of its unequal and combined development.

In this sense it can be said that the materialistic reading of Marx points to a *decalage*: Capital "exactly measures a distance and an internal dislocation (*décalage*) in the real, inscribed in its *structure*, a distance and a dislocation such as to make their own effects themselves illegible, and the illusion of an immediate reading of them the ultimate apex of their effects: *fetishism* (...) the truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures."¹⁵ This "discovery" would not have been possible without a theory of reading which Althusser finds in Freud.¹⁶

11 Ibid., p.95

12 "It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world, as that an individual could leap out of his time or jump over Rhodes" This well-known phrase from de the Preface of The Philosophy of History (Cf. Hegel, 1820) received kilometers of interpretations, many of them focused in the bond between individual and the whole, but the question that Althusser poses facing it is about the very possibility of a kind of political thought different from philosophy ¿Is it possible to confer to politics the status of a thought with its own logic without subsuming it in philosophy? That is the proper materialist question.

13 Althusser 1970 [1965], p.95

14 Ibid., p.96

15 Ibid., p.17

16 Idem., p.16

We have known, since Freud, that the time of the unconscious cannot be confused with the time of biography. On the contrary, *the concept of the time of the unconscious must be constructed* in order to obtain an understanding of certain biographical traits. In exactly the same way, it is essential to construct the concepts of the different historical times which are never given in the ideological obviousness of the continuity of time but must be constructed out of the differential nature and differential articulation of their objects in the structure of the whole.¹⁷

At this point resides the singularity of the Althusserian reading of Capital—usually occluded by hasty interpretations that directly assumed its belonging to Levi-Straussian structuralism or to a post-structuralism considered to be non-Marxist—in the search for a materialism capable of conceiving the social whole as a complex assembly of relations and as a hierarchical and unequal structured process, unified in its diversification by the type of articulation, displacement and torsion that harmonizes different and contradictory times with each other

I should say that we cannot restrict ourselves to reflecting the existence of *visible* and measurable times in this way; we must, of absolute necessity, pose the question of the mode of existence of *invisible* times, of the invisible rhythms and punctuations concealed beneath the surface of each visible time. Merely reading *Capital* shows that Marx was highly sensitive to this requirement. It shows, for example, that the time of economic production is a specific time (differing according to the mode of production), but also that, as a specific time, it is a complex and non-linear time— a time of times, a complex time that cannot be *read* in the continuity of the time of life or clocks, but has to be *constructed* out of the peculiar structures of production.¹⁸

On the basis of this plural and contradictory conception of historical time, Althusser will develop a few years later his theory of social reproduction which puts the question of duration, that is to say the way in which the structure exists as a given conjuncture, on the scene. Speaking of a formation as a *conjuncture* in Louis Althusser's terms—this means, as a contradictory unity, at once a process and a result—demands avoiding a reductive diagnosis of the complexity of the situation through every possible mean and, especially, of its temporal, structurally contradictory condition. The possibility of a political reading that points precisely

17 Althusser 1970 [1965]: 103

18 Ibid., p.101

toward this contradictory consistency depends on the intellection of these contradictions; that is to say, to the spots of maximal saturation which are precisely those of greater structural weakness—as the freudian category of *overdetermination* enables to understand them, which Althusser resorts to in his enterprise of problematizing the idealist notion of a teleological time contemporary to itself.

This scheme poses the question of the determined processes of reproduction in the terms of the concrete forms of existence of the economic exploitation, *which is abstract with regards to them*.

With a certain gravitation toward spinozist materialism, Althusser affirms the identity between duration and existence, which allows us to hold at the same time the “two ends of a chain”: On one side, the postulate on the primacy of the relations of production based on the economic exploitation of the productive forces and the methodical caution to assume that the concrete history of a social formation is the history (i. e. the complex articulation of temporalities) of *the reproduction of its relations of production*.

This allows us to affirm that, considering a determined conjuncture, one must first assume that there is a primacy of the relations of production upon the productive forces and that there is not only one single mode of production within a given social formation, but a tendentially dominant one over other modes of production, being the relations between them a contradictory articulation of different temporalities—such as many Latin-American Marxist have shown when thinking Imperialism.¹⁹ And secondly, that this—complex and contradictory—unity is determinant of a social formation. And that, at the same time, the capitalist relation of production (dispossession and separation of the workforce from the means of production) is abstract with regards to the concrete and contradictory complex of relations of production and the superstructural formations in which its reproduction is given.²⁰

These thesis lead us to think about ideology in the key of class struggle as an overdetermined complex of contradictory processes and not only as a failed universalizing operation of a single interpellation. On the contrary, the operation of ideological totalization consists of surrogating that complexity, the efficacy index of its differential articulation, immanent to the material complex of ideological apparatuses. This scheme may not

19 Cf. Mariategui, 1928; Quijano, 1988

20 “...both ideologues of neo-capitalism and neoanarchists are sweeping exploitation under the rug, the former by way of a defence of the notion that the capitalist economy no longer exists, that we have a ‘service economy’, the latter by declaring that the essence of exploitation is repression, we need to recall this truth that Marx brought to light. Everything that happens in a capitalist social formation, including the forms of state repression that accompany it (we shall see which forms and why), is rooted in the material base of capitalist relations of production, which are relations of capitalist exploitation, and in a system of production in which production is itself subordinated to exploitation and thus to the production of capital on an extended scale.”, Althusser, 2014, p. 33

be subsumed within the scheme of a single vector accommodating Subject and State, conceiving both as homogenous metaphysical unities in any of their declinations, but it also prevents us from resting on the image of the real subsumption of subjects within the logic of capital through technics. The current risks that debilitate leftist thinking are related to the impoverishment or weakening of the overdeterminate dialectic. The harassment of the dominant ideology reinstates a neo-idealism, no longer in the shape of a faith in humanity's progress, but of a resignation facing the ineluctable in the domination instrumented by an algorithmic superpower. It is indispensable to point out that the theoretical and political consequences of this scheme conflow darkly with those of the neoliberal ideology of the "End of history" and its fetichistic fascination with technology.

The reading that Louis Althusser undertakes of Marx cannot be understood if it is not conceived as an intervention in an abysmal conjunction, the process of a torsion that connects and separates the conjuncture of the sixties and the one that takes shape in the eighties. It is within this framework that his proposal places the struggle with idealism - and especially with its concrete formations: humanist and historicist - at the heart of materialist critique.

The eighties decreed the surpassing of the problem of ideology.²¹ In a few years, a sort of hermeneutic hiatus was to leave this constellation of thoughts, which we could call the Althusserian problematic, in a silence full of vociferousness. This brutal suspensive movement, which turned one of the most vibrant pages in the history of 20th century ideas with ferocious efficiency, was produced at the price of the silencing of some of its representatives, even though, paradoxically, the "theoretical novelties" in the field of critical thought of the following decades were deeply tributary to them. It was Balibar who, with the greatest mastery, managed to grasp this circumstance: Wiping out the role of Althusser in this period is a typical aspect of a more general censorship, which has a very precise meaning: it means denying that Marxism in the post-war period (and especially in the 60s and 70s) was not a simple repetition of dogmas drawn from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin (or even Mao), denying therefore that changes and events took place in its realm, bearing an objective relationship to the social and political issues of the period. It seems important now to deny that there was intellectual activity—therefore productivity—within Marxism, not only illusions. Marxist intellectuals, and especially communist intellectuals, must be portrayed as either passive victims or impostors, the mere instruments of a gigantic conspiracy. They should not have been able to think by themselves, just as Marxism and communism should not have had any real history, except the history of a catastrophic imposture.²²

21 cf. Butler, 1997; Laclau, 2001, among others

22 Balibar 1993, p.2

The weakening of theoretical Marxism took shape within the framework of an abandonment of the relevance of the question of historical causality and with it, the opportunity for the conjunction of a just diagnosis of the conjuncture and a politically powerful thought of its transformation. It is necessary, and even urgent, to open up the operation of closure and silencing that marked the weakening of critical thought and the reduction of its scope to a permanent adjustment of descriptive instruments to the detriment of a question about the relationship between theory, ethics and politics. It is not only a question of exercising a fairer and more deprived reading of the dominant ideological tendencies of the eighties and nineties, but of doing so in order to reveal, in the light of what that operation silenced. Because that silencing continues to produce effects on the current limits of the critical intellectual field. That silence is today the political impotence of our analyses.

III. The last humanist utopia: totalitarian ideological apparatus and hatred of castration

The last utopia of the 20th century was called the "Information Society". Its consecration was celebrated as the "End of History" and was fantasized as the achievement of a planetary harmony with which, thanks to the full incorporation of goods and signs into the common market, cultural barriers would be eliminated and a kind of "humanitarian" tolerance would be achieved, beyond material inequalities and historical differences. We cannot claim that financial and telecommunications expansion has not achieved its goal, yet borders, barriers and walls, both material and symbolic, are being raised to the order of the day with redoubled care, and sometimes even prompted by claims formulated by desperate masses.

What has happened?

When the world seems to have reached the humanist utopia of maximum enlightenment, the proliferation of communicational flows and the consecration on a planetary scale of the so-called "Information Society", a paradoxical era of renewed obscurantism, segregationist tendencies and the intensification of violence threatens life and impoverishes democratic forms of coexistence. The "success" of globalization thus contradictorily coincides with the signs of its failure and the dream of an unlimited world has become a kind of nightmare of claustrophobia. The promise of the "world without frontiers" becomes a kind of timeless nightmare that consecrates the stage of those post-apocalyptic fantasies, where the catastrophe has already happened and time closes in on itself in an eternal repetition of the present. A totalized (and totalitarian) experience of the present time coincides with the dehistoricization of social experience and immerses us in an atmosphere where the insignificance of politics produces the disappearance of the future itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic "happens" to this world shaped by presentism.

Returning to a counterpoint between intellectuals - Maurice Blanchot (1964) to Jaspers (1958) - concerning nothing less than the images of the "End of History" mobilized by the threat of the atomic bomb in the middle of the 20th century, Alenka Zupančič offers an idea that opens up a way of questioning the "event" condition of the COVID 19 pandemic and the degree of "exceptionality" of the measures taken on a global scale in its name. Written in 2018, Zupančič's text has nothing "premonitory" about it, but outlines a question which, although it seems too abstract and philosophical, is the question of our time.

It is not possible to understand the forms of our daily thinking, the languages with which we formulate the categories to think about the world we belong to, if we do not take the time to think about this question: is an event possible if the "red button" has already been pressed? Or, to put it another way, what is new in this "new" novelty? What is the event character of this event that we keep talking

Well then, the problem of the demarcation of an event as such is not purely a matter of philosophical lucubration, but mobilises the common senses, the forces to configure "themes", and recognize "milestones" in common history, and of course, it raises the question of the technologies of social space, those that shape our experience of time and space, of the "here" and the "now".

The delimitation of the event as such concerns, according to Derrida (2002), public space, hence a political present transformed at every moment, in its structure and content, by the tele-technology of what is so confusingly called information or communication. The techno-informational processing of the public word and of everyday relationships offers a specific modalisation of temporality that we can call an artefact of acontecimentality, in the sense of its capacity to organise the perception of that which deserves to be recognised as a significant scansion of time. We could say that the socially dominant experience of time takes shape in the framework of a complex assembly of ideological apparatuses. As Michel Pêcheux develops, it is in ideological materiality; that is, the network of discursive formations that exist in the architecture of ritualized practices in apparatuses²³ that "the ideological conditions of the reproduction/transformation of the relations of production"²⁴ are given. This means that these contradictory conditions are constituted, at a given historical moment by the complex set of ideological apparatuses "I say complex set, i.e., a set with relations of cob.) It is to be expected that in the framework of the exponential globalization of markets based

23 cf. Althusser 2014

24 Pêcheux 1982, p.99

on the equivalent valorization of cultural, informational, cognitive goods, these contradictions would include, in a fundamental place, those resulting from national spaces and the global market. In this framework, the very "state" nature of the ideological apparatuses enters into a strong contradiction. In this contradiction, our regime of historicity modulated as a totalized time, uprooted from community experiences, collective memories and cultural differences is experienced by communities and subjects with violent consequences.

The homogenized and immediate temporality of algorithmic calculation restricts real social richness and diversity to an image that is based on the structural obtention of the conflict sedimented in words and of the relationship between politics and disagreement.

The info-communicational artefact is, we could say, the dominant ideological apparatus of our time, in the sense that it organizes practices and rituals into discursive formations with a specific regime whose temporality tends to be *totalitarian*. It is not only that, as is often said, the "new technologies" reconfigure the grammars of political discursiveness by postponing, under the primacy of a temporality of chatter and relativism of opinions, the properly political moment of decision.²⁵ Rather, these are practical and ritualized procedures that produce their regressive effects on the functioning of the humanist myth of the social pact, tensioning the very forms of the humanist subjective interpellation device and the scheme of the "illusion of the self" that are consubstantial with social life as we know it and its usual political forms.

The effect of informational artefactuality is not so much the negation of social conflict, but the contraction of the imaginary scene of sociality that was supposed to shape it into a social form; a scene that had as its framework the delimitation of a national community, plotted in a national language, a series of customs and institutions whose specificities resulted from a determined history. Among other issues, the political efficacy of the complex of apparatuses that constituted the specific materiality of that scene, was given by its capacity to deny the constitutive aggressiveness of the imaginary identification among the members of that community, by means of processing it into a complex of disciplinary institutions and devices of identification and affective transference that enabled a certain dialectic game between order and freedom, with emphasis sometimes more individualistic, sometimes more communitarian.

According to Etienne Balibar, the current weakening of the egalitarian imagination, on which the ideological efficacy of the state's "illusory community" was based, tends to coincide with the expansion of experiences of extreme defencelessness and the threat of subjective disintegration, in the disproportionate invigoration of de-

25 cf. Badiou, 2005

democratisation tendencies that stretch the very mechanism of political representation to the limit and, far from reducing the conflict, intensify it over areas that are sacrificial for not being exploitable of human life -individual and social- and administer it by deactivating its collective processing as a political power.²⁶

The political-informational artefact of "consensus" administered as a mode of sociability embodies the contradiction between the global scene sustained by info-communicational devices and the national scene, sustained by a balance of more classical disciplinary apparatuses and control devices. New ideological formations regarding "democracy" are taking shape; they are based on images that combine full visibility and zero affectation with paranoid forms of totalitarian violence, insofar as they admit a conception of what is common that can fantasize about abolishing all contamination coming from encounters with others, to the point of eliminating the very entity of the other. These are forms of pluralism without otherness –correlative to a historicity with no event- which, by denying any symbolic difference, any historically configured cultural mark, inhibits the collective inscription of any singularity.

The neoliberal artifact of the public space modulates the reproduction of the social order as an uneventing event (understood in the strong sense of a political, temporal and symbolic scansion) and operates by systematically diluting the desire for social and life ties with others (which always appear too real to be translated into codified information), while transmuting them into terror and threats of harassment. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate to characterize contemporary artefactuality as a kind of "dissolution of public space" by virtue of an inflation of the universe of the ultra-individual private sphere, but rather, its reconfiguration in the terms of a contradictory globalized space, that is to say - expansive and undifferentiated. Within that space, everyone has a place and is tolerated as long as they are not affected - or allowed to be affected by others - and, thus, to the extent that they do not bear marks, traces of encounter and otherness; that is, they do not become properly political subjects in that space. The info-communicational device thus becomes a technology for the management of the affectivity of the community that reconfigures what the democracies of the 20th century called "masses"; in the words of Žižek, it models *paranoid multitudes*.²⁷

These masses constitute a form of totalitarian identity that is identical to itself and to the social universe, without any fissures, is constituted as an absolute presence. This identity symptomises and denies the marks of the conflict of memories and of the irreducible singularity of the rooted communities of the subjects, by virtue of which

.....
26 Balibar 2012

27 Žižek 2008

they trace differences in the present, trace temporalisations, recognise social and subjective history in terms of a complex historicity.

The mechanism of abstraction that produces this temporality of the pure present and the expanded identity that consists of it, does not need to remain hidden because it does not operate by hiding either; on the contrary, its effectiveness lies in the placement of its artificial condition in the centre of the public scene, as the absolute knowledge about society and about its future actions. In this sense, the ideological feature of the "Information Society" neoliberalism is not that of a virtuality that makes invisible the "reality" of the material and symbolic inequalities that constitute the condition of possibility of its configuration, but a virtuality that shows too much and literally configures society as a society of information: that is, whose components are not subjects of desire but they are already information and remain as information, pure communicability of bites, particles, genetic data or pulsional energy.

In this scene, the problem of democracy is reduced to the question of the immediate co-presence of opinions, opinions that concur in the public space governed by the logic of competition for equal-visibility, but with respect to which, the subjects in their singularity, are purely abstract. Thus, the ideological efficacy of this configuration does not seem to lie in the illusion of a "coexistence without conflicts" - a fantasy of a society reconciled with itself - but in a ferocious material obturation and in the ideological suppression of the necessary distance in which a subject consists as a fold of a relational plexus and as a *decalage*.

In a certain sense, the ideological efficiency of the info-communication apparatus and the complex of discourses that sustain its dominance, resides in the forms of negation of the event and of the singularity of the desiring subject that constitutes its immanent exteriority; that is, its cause. The articulated discursive complex of more or less systematized theories that cross and sustain the informational ideological apparatus - from neurosciences, biotechnology and cybernetics to psychologies of self-help and the management of emotions - does not configure a distortion of reality, but rather tends to contract, in its imaginary configuration, the temporal loop through which a subject takes shape as a subject of desire. Both in psychoanalytical terms and in the Spinozist tradition the desiring activity supposes the constitutive otherness of the subject. Thus conceived, one could not properly say that there is a "capitalist desire" as Fisher argues.²⁸ Rather one should think of capitalism as a non-desiring way of modulating affect; in this respect one could call, for example, the Lacanian category of *jouissance* that connects non-articulable residual drives with the symbolic, an indistinct order of

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28 Fisher 2016

"the same", not susceptible to being marked by a difference.²⁹We will return to this.

For now we emphasise that the simple denunciation of the artificial condition of the information apparatus can only replace the simulacrum, repeat it, by aspiring to a naturalness of 'real' social life, as non-existent as it is abstract. This mode of criticism is trapped in the very labyrinth of humanism, swinging between its vitalist and technocratic or economist tendencies.

This new naturalistic illusion underlying any denunciation of the artificial condition of the technological apparatus constitutes a new form of economicism. Against this tendency to subsume the problem of reproduction under the primacy of the development of the productive forces over the social relations of production, the materialist theory of ideology calls for an approach to the technological question, from the point of view of social reproduction attentive to its contradictory and unadjusted consistency. It is not a question then of reformulating the theory of alienation in a renewed way by invoking dispersed fragments of Marx on the real subsumption, but of understanding the problem of the reproduction of the overdetermined unity of relations of production and development of the productive forces - including its technical dimension - under the understanding of the singular temporal modulations of that 'time of times' which is the time of Capital, understood as a social relation based on the regulation of time. This Marxist thesis has been recently recovered by feminist Social Reproducction Theory.³⁰

Thus understood the so-called "algorithmic governmentality" loses its fetishistic inexorability. As Derrida warns, however artificial and manipulative it may be, it cannot be expected that the artefact will not surrender or bend to the coming of what is coming, to the event that transports it. And of which it will bear witness, even if only in self-defence.³¹ The politics of the event can only be read within the framework of a certain critical work on our experience of time, or better, within it: this

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29 Lacan 1991, 2006 ; 2011, among others.

30 As Arruza (2015) says, recalling Tombazos (1994), Tomba (2012) and Bensaid (2002): "What differentiates one mode of production from another, then, is – among other factors – precisely the historically specific way in which time is organised. In capitalism, as stressed, among others, by Stavros Tombazos, Daniel Bensaid and Massimiliano Tomba, time is both a social relation and the measure of social relations. In this economy of time, different temporalities are intertwined – that of production analysed in *Capital* Volume I, of circulation in Volume II and of reproduction as a whole in Volume III" "For Marx, abstract labour time is the indifferent, homogenous time measured by the clock and crystallised in constant capital, commodities and money, in contrast with the individual, concrete labour time, filled with a specific content. This abstract, linear, calculable time, measured through clocks and chronometers, and that in turn measures labour, expands its kingdom well beyond the walls of workplaces, and increasingly regulates also leisure time, through the mediation of commodities." cf. Arruza, 2015, pp. 28–52

31 Derrida 2002.

exercise demands a consideration of the present as a conjuncture. That is to say, as a contradictory and unequal relationship of forces. Only if we are capable of persevering in the disruption of the ideological present can we recognise there the actuality of the future, and the memory of what remains to be done.

But whether we are able to do this does not depend on our theories but on class struggle within the various dimensions of historical life including class struggle in ideology, which is also carried out in our theoretical field. There is no "consciousness-raising" program capable of reversing this ideological process which is historical and not pedagogical. The problem must be thought in terms of ideological class struggle. Because as Pêcheux says:

Ideology does not reproduce itself in the general form of a *Zeitgeist* (i.e., the spirit of the age, the 'mentality' of an epoch, 'habits of thought', etc.) imposed in an even and homogeneous way on 'society' as a kind of space pre-existing class struggle: 'The ideological state apparatuses are not the realization of ideology in general . . . '(2)' . . . nor even the conflict-free realization of the ideology of the ruling class', which means that it is impossible to attribute to each class its own ideology, as if each existed 'before the class struggle' in its own camp, with its own conditions of existence and its specific institutions, such that the ideological class struggle would be the meeting point of two distinct and pre-existing worlds (...) the ideological state apparatuses are not pure instruments of the ruling class, ideological machines simply reproducing the existing relations of production (...) which means that the ideological state apparatuses constitute simultaneously and contradictorily the site and the ideological conditions of the transformation of the relations of production.³²

Long before the current pandemic broke out, we have known that the so-called "new technologies" are tied to forms of data expropriation that violate all known forms of the right to information and privacy; we know that the economic world that makes them possible exists only as a destructive process of financialization of economies, flexibilization of all labour rights, hyper-exploitation and precarization, and we are so "conscious " of this that we even have films that "reveal the secret" available on the best known platforms. But even knowing this, we have decided to suspend this collectively acquired knowledge in order to accept the virtualization of all areas of our personal and collective life. It seems that sustaining that "normality" of the here-and-now is much more urgent and achievable, rather than imagining a discontinuation

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32 Pêcheux 1982, pp.98-99

or a cut in the present. Imagining the future within the framework of an uneventful presence is the dominant ideological effect of our conjuncture, sustained by countless practices, rituals, apparatuses and discursive formations. The timing of the pandemic has exposed the effectiveness of the dominant ideology in action, fully and before our eyes.

And this allows us to understand the "paradox" that in our conjuncture it is the supreme and ultraconservative discourses that adopt combative vanguard rhetoric against "the system" or "the world order". However anomalous these may seem, they are only the "ideological vanguard" of the negation of the event-with their calls to ignore the danger and maintain the wheel of the global economy-that constitutes the temporary regime of the dominant ideology. And that is why they are particularly dangerous because they find a generalized affective disposition to make their discourses "catch on", even in sectors whose interests are not represented at all by segregationist slogans. In ideological terms, that is, in our practices and rituals and beyond our political vocations and good intentions, we all practice the denial of the future. The rituals that in a practical way support the implementation of technological resources, both in private relations and in public matters, consolidate a massive renunciation of the event and produce, whether we like it or not, a firm disposition not to even imagine it. The symptom of them is our hidden desires to "return" to normality; paradoxically, the most progressive thing today seems to be to yearn for the past. We tell ourselves that we owe the "exceptionality" of the pandemic, but this practical refusal to imagine the future is no different from that which makes it possible for poor people, like the one I come from, to accept unpayable and damning debts, a hundred years. The symptom of them is our hidden desires to "return" to normality; paradoxically, the most progressive thing today seems to be to yearn for the past. We tell ourselves that it is because of the "exceptionality" of the pandemic, but this practical refusal to imagine the future is no different from that which makes it possible for poor nations, like the one I come from, to accept unpayable and damning debts for over a hundred years.

The bad news is that the "exceptionality" of the pandemic is too normal and finds the responses less exceptional. It is the consequence of a way of life that has made the crisis its criterion of normality.

The collective setting up of what is an "event" and its distinction from what is not is today disrupted, just as the very principles of normality are disrupted. The identification parameters, the discursive frameworks that embody the metalinguistic function, are subject to the contradictions inherent in the national-global complex of ideological apparatuses and with it, the concrete discursive formations that sustain the material consistency of any symbolic order. If this disruption is a symptom, it is precisely because, although there is nothing new about it, the "exceptionality" of the "health crisis" and the seriousness of the

"economic crisis" associated with it cannot be named or conceptualized. We have lost sight of the theories that would have allowed us to connect these ideological and political experiences with historical causality, and to inscribe their conjunctural modulations in the framework of the global process of agony of the regime of imperialist accumulation. It is this agony that explains the logic of the "irrational" moment of the financial powers³³ and the fact that the very terms of normality have been written for several decades, in the language of the exception.

What we call neoliberalism, which is only the agonizing form of imperialist humanism, has reconfigured the borders between normality and exception, by making the crisis a new form of normalization.³⁴ The instrumentation of war and the strategy of economic and financial shock have installed, decades ago, an economy of crisis. The dictatorial experiences that made Latin America a neoliberal laboratory at the end of the 1970s, exposed from the beginning the authoritarian fabric of the neoliberal turn of imperialist capitalism, despite the fact that its face took until 2008 to be presented before the eyes of the central countries.³⁵ But also in these countries, as Althusser or Poulantzas³⁶ argued, the technocratic forms of European social democracies since the end of the 1970s carried with them technocratic, therefore, undemocratic and authoritarian tendencies.

The growing irrationality of public and private financial debt policies and the entrepreneurial narratives that call for "making an opportunity of every crisis", converge in a background in respect of which it is practically impossible to identify the "exceptionality of an event".

If there is anything new to be expected in this context, it is the disappointing and non-epical normalization of the apocalypse.

It is against this new modulation of the "end of history" ideology that we must beware, because it is no longer a pamphletary discourse like that of Fukuyama, nor is it based on the hope of a reconciled and harmonious world. Power no longer finds a dominant ideological narrative capable of strategically regulating the fantasies that sustain a renewed utopia. It is its impotence, the disengagement of its strategic springs and the cohesion of its hegemonic bloc that explains both the proliferation of apocalyptic discourses and the rituals of desperate inertia. The most curious thing is that it is this impotence to give itself a hegemonic strategy that produces the practical modulations on which our unconscious affective experience is based with the greatest efficiency. The agonising crisis of the historical block of financial capital produces

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33 Cf. Davies 2016

34 cf. Collazo 2020

35 cf. Davies 2016

36 Althusser 2018, Poulantzas 2019

the ideological efficacy for its reproduction. It is not a project to capture our unconscious life, it is a historical hesitation of the complex of discourses and institutions that offered symbolic and imaginary support to that ominous thing that inhabits every modern man.

This leads us to think that apocalyptic images, with all their scenographic interruptions, speak of a dominant social fantasy under which we go through the unbearability of lives tied to the agonising decline of the imperialist regime of accumulation, in its neoliberal forms. The famous image coined by the anti-imperialist left at the beginning of the century, which promised 'Socialism or Barbarism', becomes part of this catastrophic fantasy with which we endure - and reproduce - the normality and insignificance of barbarization. Critical thinking and political imagination (not only that of the left, but more generally that of all popular-democratic aspirations) is facing one of the most difficult crossroads.

The articulated discursive complex of more or less systematized theories that cross and sustain the informational ideological apparatus - from neurosciences, biotechnology and cybernetics to psychologies of self-help and management of emotions - does not configure a distorted or veiled objectivity, but rather tends to contract, in its imaginary reconfiguration, the temporal loop through which a subject takes shape as a subject of desire. This is the key to our predominant agonic melancholy as a subjective affection. Every ideology is supported by unconscious springs.

As we have said, presentism, as a regime of temporality, creates an ideology of pluralism that behaves like a fantasy of the elimination of democracy -and, in short, of the other. Relativism and cynicism are the reverse side of these regressive impulses, because the illusion of erasing differences demands a kind of forced forgetfulness, and then it also destroys the very possibility of a common intelligibility, which sustains and makes viable the shared life.

It is no surprise that this scenario is becoming a breeding ground for the resurgence of authoritarianism. When these are characterized as "hate speeches"³⁷, attributing the ideological question to a kind of transmission by pure repetition; or when this "hate" is directly attributed to a class project, as if an affection could be injected by means of planning, we do not succeed in permeating the surface of the phenomenon. But more seriously, we fail to see the overdetermined causality that brings together the affective, even unconscious, dispositions with the complex ensemble of relationships that consists in our conjuncture, in its multiple practical, discursive, technical, and institutional mediations. We do not manage to think this complexity because we have got rid of the theory that tried to think it: the Marxist

37 Cf. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040731>

theory of ideology. Understood in the terms of the theory of ideology, the phenomenon of 'hatred' is not of some supposed 'others', not even of some other class. Hate is always of the One. That is to say, it is the result of the processes of unification of history into a global narrative, it is the real effect on the affective and unconscious dimension of the failed attempt to homogenize the unique ways of life, that is, the ways of desiring and enjoying. We do not manage to think this complexity because we have got rid of the theory that tried to think it: the Marxist theory of ideology. Understood in the terms of the theory of ideology, the phenomenon of 'hatred' is not of some supposed 'others', not even of some other class. Hate is always of the One. That is to say, it is the result of the processes of unification of history into a global narrative, it is the effect on the affective and unconscious dimension of the failed attempt to homogenize the unique ways of life, that is, the modes of desire and *jouissance*. This tendency makes the historical contradiction between the national and the global scenes of imperialist capitalism explode. And if the most violent thing in this stage of history started with the brutal dictatorships of Pinochet and Videla, it is because these contradictions were always brutal in the peripheral areas of the imperialist geopolitics. In Latin America, nationalisms were in most cases racist processes based on the discipline of the labour force in imperialist and at the same time semi-slavery modes of labour. Monopolistic capital and slave labour are realities that have been known for a long time in these lands, where the tanathic forms of Capital are longstanding and practically coextensive with the modern idea of Man.

In his correspondence with Einstein regarding war, Freud (1932) explained:

So far I have set out what seems to me the kernel of the matter: the suppression of brute force by the transfer of power to a larger combination, founded on the community of sentiments linking up its members (...) We have even committed the heresy of explaining the origin of human conscience by some such "turning inward" of the aggressive impulse. Obviously when this internal tendency operates on too large a scale, it is no trivial matter; rather, a positively morbid state of things (...). If the propensity for war be due to the destructive instinct, we have always its counter-agent, Eros, to our hand. All that produces ties of sentiment between man and man must serve us as war's antidote. These ties are of two kinds. First, such relations as those toward a beloved object, void though they be of sexual intent. The psychoanalyst need feel no compunction in mentioning "love" in this connection; religion uses the same language: Love thy neighbor as thyself. A pious injunction, easy to enounce, but hard to carry out! The other bond of sentiment is by way of identification. All that brings out the

significant resemblances between men calls into play this feeling of community, identification, whereon is founded, in large measure, the whole edifice of human society.³⁸

Religions as well as the institutions that took their place, taking over many of the reproductive functions of the social order, fulfilled in moments of "normality" in an always unstable but relatively effective way this function of regulating the irreducible aggressiveness of social life. According to J-A Miller, in 1967, Lacan anticipated that our future of common markets will be balanced by the increasingly harsh extension of the processes of segregation.³⁹ Contemporary processes of segregation constitute an inherent tendency in the historical process of cultural uniformisation that implied the contemporary commitment to the so-called 'global village' and whose universalist ambition entails a claim to maximize the pretensions of symbolic homogenization that produce a singular inflection in classical modern humanism.

In this sense, the current processes of segregation manifested in singular forms of racism, macho violence, classism, etc., can be thought of as exposing the failure of the social utopias of the 19th century that dreamed of universalization that depended on the active validity of a symbolic order organized around the notions of "race" and "gender" and the legitimization of material inequalities. This is a paradoxical failure resulting from the tendency of the project to capture everything that resists assimilation by the logic of Capital.

We are then witnessing the experience of the absence of limits to this universalization, in the form of a paradox in which the formalizing and equivalent tendency of the discourse of science transmutes into the promotion of renewed and perhaps much more severe segregations; as well as in the paradoxical solidarity between new technocratic utopias and the restoration of neo-religious and traditionalist discourses that result from a reactive movement proper to the experience of the modern subject "especially lost in its *jouissance*, since what could frame it from traditional wisdom, was gnawed away, subtracted."⁴⁰

What Miller puts forward is that the crisis of the rooted communities and of the discursive formations that embodied the symbolic function that conferred certain particularities on their cultural worlds - national languages, systems of customs, etc. -, in the framework of the global expansion of capital flows, is translated into experiences of subjective disintegration. In this way, the imaginary unity of one's own

38 Cf. "The Einstein-Freud Correspondence (1931-1932)" available: <https://www.public.asu.edu/~jmlynch/273/documents/FreudEinstein.pdf>

39 Miller, 1985, p.50

40 Miller, 2010 [1985], p. 53, my translation

ego is endangered. In the subject's experience, this threat is caused by an imaginary other or by the abstract law that imposes limits on its *jouissance*. The encounter with anything of the other that might offer some frustrating obstacle to the effort of mutual understanding becomes a threat of dissolution for the subject himself. In this way, those commands that in the context of a culture impoverished in its historical differences, call us to recognize the other in the Other - a globalized, dehistoricized, pasteurized neighbor - produce as a paradoxical effect the indistinction of two experiences of the limit: the limit that conciliates the anthropological tolerance of the differences and that of the post-metaphysical acceptance of the inexistence of meta-language. The very existence of the others confronts the subject with an experience of castration for which he no longer has any political, ethical or religious narratives.

The national borders that embodied the cultural differences between particular historical communities reinscribed-in their internal contradictions and conflicts-the complexity of historical time as an immanent exteriority of cyclical and equivalent global capital time.

In the current dominance of the globalised culture of hyperproductivity and limitless consumption, these borders have been disrupted. The paradoxical result shows the ominous reverse of the humanist promise: the other is perceived as an unbearable obstacle to the expansion of one's narcissistic *jouissance* and this experience provokes the most real experiences of threat. Thus, the circumstances of life with others, including those of an order of coexistence, or the generic confrontation with the principles of authority, confront the subjects with some kind of limit that they cannot tolerate.

When these experiences are multiplied within the framework of cultural settings which do not offer symbolic frameworks capable of giving them any meaning, but on the contrary multiply labour or economic failures, the various manifestations of the precarization or fragility of survival, the imminence of death or crisis, etc., all forms of otherness become an unbearable threat. Any reminiscence of castration brought about by our mortal condition itself is lived out in an imaginary mode that is reactive, intolerant, as a hatred of castration, in its double valence: "cruel optimism"⁴¹ - in the desperate attempt to pursue unlimited *jouissance*, an expansive, hyper-consumerist or exitist narcissism - and "hedonist-nihilist" - as frustration, unbearable anguish, forms of medicalisation, self-inflicted violence, etc. In both cases, it becomes clear that to the extent that the problem of castration is the problem of the subject himself, because the Other supposes a space of extimacy, then hatred of the Other is hatred of oneself.

41 cf. Berlant 2011

IV. To conclude or to recommence. Towards a primitive future

Why do the libertarian narratives of the neoconservative factors work? Why do the right-wing assume anti-system positions and call for a revolt against the power apparatuses that for decades guaranteed the reproduction of inequalities? It is not enough to think of the question in terms of a "class project" to dismantle the benefits of the social state of the mid-twentieth century.⁴² And it is not enough, not because this is not true, but because it does not explain either the popular adhesions that this project arouses or the paradox that its success increases while any possible scheme that tries to identify a strategic centre of global power is blurred.

To understand this situation, which is not so new but already typical of neoliberalism, it is necessary to abandon the order/freedom dichotomy that has organised political discussions around the question of State power. It is necessary, first of all, to understand that the democratic condition of the modern public space is not in the immediate or spontaneous manifestation of popular demands, but in the laborious collective elaboration of its mediations, in the forms of thought, in the representations and arguments that allow us to imagine, through their contradictions, the social destiny. In other words, the mystery of democracy as a paradoxical combination of order, conflict and freedom, is hidden less in the contingent force of the outbreaks of social unrest than in the collective craftsmanship of its interpretation.

Popular sovereignty does not live in a state of permanent rebellion, nor in the fleeting nature of a thunderbolt, but in the capacity to make a continuous struggle in a permanent process of expansion out of its potency. Popular sovereignty is the movement for the democratisation of the common intellect and of life with others. This public elaboration of the intelligence is a "philosophical" task (because questions about justice, freedom, equality are philosophical, regardless of who thinks them), as well as a political one (insofar as the answers are always concrete taking sides in a given history), but they are given on the basis of the cultural and ideological elements available, driven by the sensibilities and affections of the common people and modulated by the political forces and technical artifices that shape the public space.⁴³

Thus thought out, we could say that the modern history of democracy is the history of the controversial work of thought (philosophy, science, art) and of politics against superstition that constitutes a part of the common affections.

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42 Harvey 2005

43 Caletti, 2006

Our history is one of totalitarian melancholy because, as Zupančič⁴⁴ says, it is without object. So attached to the affection of loss, we cannot put a name to what we have already lost, we cannot desire again.

Between the disaster of the concentration camps to come, portrayed by Bergman, the threat of total annihilation represented by the atomic bomb, in Kubric's film and our current post-apocalyptic narratives, a transformation is taking place in the modes of experiencing historical and subjective time that impact on the possibility of giving (or not giving) ourselves a political imagination. If the disaster is no longer "imminent", because it has already happened, then there is no "time" to create the Humanity that we would have lost. If we are the inhabitants of an apocalypse that lasts too long, there is only room for the normalisation of the destruction. What else do the speeches of figures like Trump or Bolsonaro invite us to do, rather than a cynical resignation, a melancholic and superstitious apathy that can only persevere in the permanent crisis, under the not at all unlikely rule of "save yourself"?

Against the efficacy of impotence, the great political challenge for the left demands the abandonment of the false dialectic of hope and hopelessness that underpins the regime of Present Day temporality, in which contemporary forms of superstition are watered down, in order to ask itself the question of real historical alternatives. In order to do this, it is important not to forget that the "transformation" we are witnessing is a transformation without event: a transformation in the ideological aspect of the dominant humanist ideology in solidarity with the creation of the global scene that we are looking upon with horror today. Perhaps then we will understand that the challenge lies in abandoning hope in Humanity, in order to end up losing what we never had.

To lose with it the poor scheme that affirms or denies the State in an abstract way, making use of the image of a pure naturalistic exteriority, a longed-for return to the most authentic whose theological genealogy duplicates humanism in new postcards of paradise.

The challenge must be forged on the basis of the only really existing historical pillars: the contradictory immanence of popular sovereignty in the restricted forms of today's post-dictatorial and techno-authoritarian democracies and the immanence of the historical transformation (the reality of the event) in the very fabric of the agony of the imperialist regime of accumulation.

Because, perhaps, by urging in the archive we will find that the tools are closer than we think and we will succeed in confronting the "save yourselves" with a "women and children first". Perhaps it is a matter of knowing how to listen to what is burning in the humanist light; to find again the fragile, the weak, the vulnerable... in short, the last ones, in order to put them first. The blacks first, the Indians first. Perhaps it is a

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44 Zupančič 2018

question of recovering the multi-temporalism capable of breaking the centre-periphery inequality that sustains the unique contemporary time of global humanism. Knowing how to read in the primitives of imperialist humanism, the immanence of the desire for the future. Any other alleged option of "externality" or "future" only speculates about the closed world of our superstitions.

This is a material operation in the experience of historical time, capable of re-inscribing the current heterogeneity in the opaque present, to reinvent the Leninist metaphor of the "weakest link" in a new reading capable of assuming the opportunity of the event in the most densely knotted conjuncture. The future of humanity does not belong to the white man; it will be woman, precarized worker, beast, queer, Indian, black, monster, or it will not be.

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Beyond the Necropolitics Principle: Suicidal State and Authoritarian Neoliberalism

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to discuss a possible exhaustion of the necropolitics paradigm in favor of the emergence of new forms of management of violence and disappearance by sovereign power within authoritarian neoliberalism. Such form of management finds its roots in the concept of “suicidal state” mobilized in the seventies to deal with certain fundamental aspects of the fascist regime of violence. This will force us to address the paradigmatic character of anti-pandemic “anti-policies” developed in global laboratories of authoritarian neoliberalism, such as Brazil.

Keywords: necropolitics, suicidal state, fascism, authoritarian neoliberalism, sovereign power, pandemic

*And the body became a plant,
and stone,
and mud,
and nothing.*

Machado de Assis

Through the global impacts of the pandemic, it is possible that fundamental changes are taking place in social management structures. One concerns transformations in the exercise of sovereign power through ways of managing death and disappearance. As has occurred on more than one occasion, such changes begin at the periphery of the global capitalist system to gradually serve as models for the central countries, especially in times of chronic intensification of social struggles like the ones we are now entering.

Such changes are pressured by the contemporary evidence of the profoundly authoritarian dimension of neoliberal management models and their inability to produce macro-structures of social protection and redistribution in a scenario of worsening inequalities and concentration. In this sense, if we want to understand certain trends immanent to the neoliberal model in its new phase, we must turn our eyes to authoritarian neoliberalism laboratories, such as those that are developing in peripherally inserted countries, such as Brazil.

We can begin to describe such changes from the notion of paradigm shift. For, in fact, we are seeing a shift outside the paradigm of what is conventionally called “necropolitics.” We know how such a discussion on necropolitics arises from the reflection on sovereign power as an exercise of: “generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations.”¹ We should talk

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¹ Mbembe, 2003, p. 14

about power not only as the management of life and the administration of bodies, as Foucault preferentially describes, but mainly the decision about death and extermination.² This understanding of sovereignty made great use of the way in which Nazism and its forms of death management were based, among others, on the integration of technologies of social subjection and destruction whose roots refer to colonial logic and its constituent racism. As if Nazism should also be seen as part of the history of the transposition of technologies of colonial domination to European soil, to the soil of central countries of global capitalism.

In fact, the colonial dynamic is based on an “ontological distinction” that will prove to be extremely resilient, preserving itself even after the demise of colonialism as a socio-economic form. It consists in the consolidation of a sharing system between two subjectivation regimes. One allows subjects to be recognized as “person”, another takes subjects to be determined as “things”³. Those subjects who reach the condition of “person” can be recognized as having rights linked, preferably, to the protection offered by the State. As one of the consequences, the death of a “person” will be marked by deceit, by mourning, by the social manifestation of loss. It will be the object of narrative and commotion. On the other hand, subjects degraded to the condition of “things” (and the structural degradation occurs within slave relationships, although it normally remains even after the formal decline of slavery) will be the object of a death without mourning⁴. Their death will be seen as bearing the status of object degradation. This death will have no narrative, but it will be reduced to the numerical quantification that we normally apply to things. Those who live in countries built from the colonial matrix know the normality of such a situation when, even today, they open newspapers and read: “9 dead in the last police intervention in Paraisópolis”, “85 killed in the rebellion of prisoners in Belém”. The description usually boils down to numbers with no history.

It is not difficult to understand how this naturalization of the ontological distinction between subjects through the fate of their deaths is a fundamental device of government. It perpetuates an undeclared civil war dynamic through which those subjected to maximum economic plunder, to the most degraded conditions of work and remuneration, are paralyzed in their revolt by the generalization of fear in the face of state extermination. Such ontological distinction is thus the armed wing of a class struggle to which converge, among others, clear markers

2 See Foucault, 1976

3 About the ontological distinction between “person” and “thing” proper to slave relations, see also Esposito, 2015.

4 “Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a “home,” loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)” (Mbembe, idem, p. 21).

of racialization. For it is a matter of passing on such an ontological distinction within social life and its daily structure. The subjects must, at all times, understand how the state acts from such a distinction, how it operates explicitly and in silence.

In this sense, let us note how such necropolitical dynamics responds, after the end of explicit colonial relations, to strategies for the preservation of class interests, in which the state acts, before certain classes, as a “protective state,” while it acts before others as “predatory state.”⁵ In short, it must be insisted that necropolitics thus appears as a device for the preservation of structures of paralysis of class struggle, normally more explicit in territories and countries marked by the centrality of colonial experiences.

The genesis of the suicidal state

But we must be attentive to the consolidation of socio-historical contexts in which the state abandons its protective nature, constituting itself from the discourse of “letting die”, of indifference in relation to the deaths that occur in all sectors of the populations under its jurisdiction. That is, there are situations in which the logic of the predatory state is generalized to the integrality of the social body, even though not all sectors of this body are at the same level of exposure to vulnerability. In these circumstances, as I would like to defend, a phenomenon of a different nature occurs, which cannot be read completely within a necropolitical logic.

Paul Virilio, in a discussion about the specificity of the regimes of violence in the fascist state, coined the term “suicidal state.”⁶ This was an astute way of going against the liberal discourse of equality between Nazism and Stalinism by insisting on the structuring regimes of violence as a differential feature between the fascist state and other forms of so-called totalitarian states, and even between other forms of colonial states. The term “suicidal” will prove fruitful because it was a way of remembering how a state of this nature should not be understood only as the manager of death for specific groups, as we see in the necropolitical dynamics. It was the continuous actor of its own catastrophe, the cultivator of its own explosion, the organizer of a thrust of society out of its own self-reproduction.⁷ According to Virilio, a state of this nature was materialized in an exemplary way in a telegram. A telegram that had a

5 About the figure of a “predatory state”, see: Chamayou, 2010.

6 Virilio, 1976

7 “We have then, in Nazi society something that is really quite extraordinary: this is a society that has generalized biopower in an absolute sense, but which has also generalized the sovereign right to kill (...) The Nazi State makes the field of the life it manages, protects, guarantees, and cultivates in biological terms absolutely coextensive with the sovereign right to kill anyone, meaning not only other people, but also its own people (...) We have an absolutely racist State, an absolutely murderous State and an absolutely suicidal State.” (, 2003, p. 260).

number: Telegram 71. It was with it that, in 1945, Adolf Hitler proclaimed the fate of a war then lost. He said: "If the war is lost, let the nation perish." With it, Hitler demanded that the German army itself destroy what was left of infrastructure in the battered nation. As if that were the real ultimate goal: that the nation would perish by its own hands, by the hands of what it itself unleashed.⁸

The discussion about the "suicidal" nature of the fascist state will be resumed in the same year by Michel Foucault, in his seminar // *faut défendre la société* (in an unjustified and deeply mistaken approach to the violence of real socialism) and years later, more systematically, by Deleuze and Guattari, in *Mille Plateaux*. Faced with the regime of destructiveness immanent to fascism and its permanent movement, Deleuze and Guattari will suggest the figure of an uncontrolled war machine that would have appropriated the State, creating not exactly a totalitarian State concerned with the extermination of its opponents, but a suicidal state unable to fight for its own preservation. Hence why it was the case to say:

Unlike the totalitarian State, which does its utmost to seal all possible lines of flight, fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition. It is curious that from the very beginning the Nazis announced to Germany what they were bringing: at once wedding bells and death, including their own death, and the death of the Germans (...) A war machine that no longer had anything but war as its object and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction. All the dangers of the other lines pale by comparison.⁹

In deepening this point, Guattari will take one step further and will see no problem in stating that the production of a line of destruction and a pure "passion for abolition" would be related to: "the tuning fork of the collective death drive that would have been liberated of the ditches of the First World War."¹⁰ This allowed him to affirm that the masses would have invested, in the fascist machine: "a fantastic collective death drive" that allowed them to abolish, in a "phantom of catastrophe,"¹¹ a reality that

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⁸The major role of the logic of self-sacrifice in the production of fascist social body unity is a topic present in many authors as: Ziemer, 1941; Marcuse, 1998; Neocleuous, 2005.

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 230

¹⁰ Guattari, 2012, p. 67. The use of the psychoanalytic concept of death drive in this context is not without raising problems due to the multiplicity immanent to the Freudian use, which describes processes of destruction, destiny, strangeness (*Unheimliche*), children's play, among others.

¹¹ Idem, p. 70. "All fascist meanings bounce off a composite representation of love and death. Eros and Thanatos becoming one. Hitler and the Nazis fought for death even and for the death of Germany.

they detested and that the revolutionary left would not have known how to provide another answer.

Leaving aside the problems raised by such use of the concept of death drive, let us remember how, according to this reading, the left would never have been able to provide the masses with a real alternative of rupture, which necessarily passed through the abolition of the state, of its immanent processes of individuation and its repressive disciplinary dynamics.¹² This is Guattari's way of following statements by Wilhelm Reich such as: "Fascism is not, as is commonly believed, a purely reactionary movement – it represents an amalgam between rebellious emotions and reactionary social ideas."¹³ The question could not be summed up only in what fascism forbids, but one must understand what it authorizes, the type of revolt it forms, or even the libidinal energy that it would be able to capture.

This reminds us of how there would be various ways of destroying the state and one of them, the counterrevolutionary form proper to fascism, would be accelerating towards its own catastrophe, even if it costs our lives. The suicidal state would be able to make the revolt against the unfair state, against the authorities that excluded us, the ritual of liquidating itself in the name of the preservation of an "outlaw" leadership that must stage his ritual of omnipotence even when his impotence is already clear. In this way, we see the link between the notion of a preventive counter-revolution and a form of pure and simple abolition of the state through the call to self-immolation of the people linked to it.¹⁴

In a way, this discussion about the suicidal state converges with analyzes made decades ago regarding violence specific to the fascist state, coming from the Frankfurt School. Let us remember, for example, what Theodor Adorno says in 1946:

At this point attention must be paid to destructiveness as the psychological basis of the fascist spirit. The programs are abstract and vague, the fulfillments are spurious and illusory because promise expressed by fascist oratory is nothing but destruction itself. It's hardly accidental that all fascist agitators dwell upon the imminence of catastrophes of some kind. Whereas they warn of impending dangers, they and their listeners get a thrill out of the

And the German masses agreed to follow them until their own destruction" (idem)

¹² Such diagnosis is in line with Marcuse's statements as: "National Socialism has done away with the essential features which characterized the modern state. It tends to abolish any separation between state and society by transferring the political functions to the social groups actually in power. In other words, National Socialism tends toward direct and immediate selfgovernment by the prevailing social groups over the rest of the population." (Marcuse, 1998, p. 70)

¹³ Reich, 1993, p. XIV. In the same year, this point was discussed by Bataille, 1970.

¹⁴ On the subject of fascism and preventive counterrevolution, see Marcuse, 1972.

idea of inevitable doom, without even make a clear-cut distinction between the destruction of their foes and of themselves (...) This is the agitator's dream, an union of the horrible and the wonderful, a delirium of annihilation masked with salvation.¹⁵

In other words, it is a question of talking about destructiveness as a "psychological basis" of fascism, and not just as a characteristic of immanent dynamics of social struggles and processes of conquest and subjection. For if it were only a matter of describing the violence of the conquest and perpetuation of power, it would be difficult to understand how it gets to this point where it would not even be possible to clearly differentiate between the destruction of their foes and of themselves, between annihilation and salvation. In order to account for the singularity of this fact, Adorno will also speak, in the sixties, of a "desire for catastrophe," of "fantasies of the end of the world" that resonate typical structures of paranoid delusions.¹⁶

Statements like these by Adorno aim to expose the singularity of the patterns of violence in fascism. For it is not just a question of generalizing the logic of militias directed against vulnerable groups, a logic through which state power rests on a para-state structure controlled by armed groups. Nor is it just a matter of leading individuals to believe that the impotence of ordinary life and constant plunder will be overcome through the individual strength of those who at last have the right to take the authorized production of violence for themselves. In this regard, we know how fascism offers a certain form of freedom, it has always been built out of the vampirization of revolt.¹⁷ Nor is it just a junction between indifference and extreme violence against historically violated groups. As necropolitics theorists remind us, such articulation did not have to wait for fascism to appear, but it is present in all countries of colonial tradition with its technologies of systematic population destruction.¹⁸

However, if Adorno speaks of "psychological basis" it is because it is necessary to understand violence, mainly, as a device of psychic mutation. A mutation whose developmental axis would be the generalization of the destructiveness to the forms of relation to oneself, to the other and to the world. In this horizon, psychology is called to break the economic illusion of individuals as agents that maximize interests.

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¹⁵ Adorno, 1946, p. 137

¹⁶ Adorno, 2019, p. 26, Adorno and Horkheimer already presented fascist as a paranoid social pathology in Adorno, and Horkheimer, 1992.

¹⁷ "The rebellion against institutionalized law changed into lawlessness and release of brute force in the service of the powers that be." (Horkheimer, 2007, p. 81).

¹⁸ It is not by chance that technologies for the management of social violence, such as concentration camps and urban segregation, were initially developed in colonial situations. See, for example: Roubinek, 2016

On the contrary, it would be necessary not to ignore libidinal investments in processes in which individuals clearly invest against their most immediate self-preservation interests.

This diagnosis of a race towards self-sacrifice, in a process in which the figure of the protective state seems to give way to a predatory state that even turns against itself, a state animated by the unstoppable dynamics of self-destruction and the destruction of the social life itself, was not exclusive to the Frankfurtians. It could also be found in Hannah Arendt's analysis. Just remember how, in 1951 (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*), Arendt spoke of the astonishing fact that those who adhered to fascism did not falter even when they became victims, even when the monster began to devour its own children.

These authors were sensitive, among others, to the fact that the fascist war was not a war of conquest and stabilization. It had no way of stopping, giving us the impression that we were facing a "perpetual movement, without object or target" whose impasses only led to an ever greater acceleration. Arendt will speak of: "movements which can remain in power only so long as they keep moving and set everything around them in motion."¹⁹ There is an unlimited war that means the total mobilization of the social force, the absolute militarization towards a conflict that makes it permanent.

Still during the war, Franz Neumann will provide a functional explanation for such a dynamic of permanent war. The so-called Nazi "state" would, in fact, be the heterogeneous and unstable composition of four groups in perpetual conflict for hegemony: the party, the army and their Prussian aristocratic high command, the monopolistic industry and the state bureaucracy:

Devoid of any common loyalty and concerned solely with the preservation of their own interests, the ruling groups will break apart as soon as the miracle-producing Leader meets a worthy opponent. At present, each section needs the others. The army needs the party because the war is totalitarian. The army cannot organize society 'totally'; that is left to the party. The party, on the other hand, needs the army to win the war and thus to stabilize and even aggrandize its own power. Both need monopolistic industry to guarantee continuous expansion. And all three need the bureaucracy to achieve the technical rationality without which the system could not operate. Each group is sovereign and authoritarian; each is equipped with legislative, administrative, and judicial power of its own; each is thus capable of carrying out swiftly and ruthlessly the necessary compromises among the four.²⁰

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¹⁹ Arendt, 1951 p. 306

²⁰ Neumann, 2009, p. 397-398

In other words, only the indefinite continuation of the war allowed this chaotic composition of sovereign and authoritarian groups to find a certain unity and stability. The war wasn't, therefore, a war of expansion and strengthening of the State, but a strategy of indefinite postponement of a State on the path of disintegration, of indefinite postponement of a collapsing political order. And to sustain such continuous mobilization with its monstrous demand for effort and incessant losses is necessary that social life be organized under the specter of catastrophe, of the constant risk invading every pore of the social body. A social body based on the increasing violence necessary to allegedly immunize itself from such a risk of catastrophe.²¹ In other words, the only way to postpone the breakdown of the political order, the tacit fragility of the order, would consist in managing, in a continuous flirtation movement with the abyss, a junction between calls for self-destructiveness and systematic reiteration of hetero-destructiveness.

It will not be by chance that, some decades later, we will find some analysts suggesting the figure of the fascist state as a social body marked by an autoimmune illness: "the ultimate condition in which the protective apparatus becomes so aggressive that it turns against its own body (which is what it should protect), leading to its death."²² The systematic presence of the topic of protection as immunization against the degeneration of the social body would, in fact, be an expression of the profound antagonisms that are going through a radicalization of class struggles and revolutionary sedition, as was the case of German society 1920s. Since Hobbes, we know how the use of the topic of immunization against the "diseases of the social body" is mobilized in situations of revolutionary upheaval.²³ It would be no different in a preventive counterrevolution such as fascism. This immunization will require the acceptance, by all the actors of the order, of the militarization of society and the transformation of war into the only possible situation for producing the unity of the social body and for producing an imperialist economic expansion on a planetary scale.

Neoliberalism and the stabilization of the collapse

But we must ask ourselves whether this notion of a suicidal state should be restricted to fascism and, in particular, to German Nazism. Would it have any explanatory power to describe the logic of violence in other political forms? And, if the answer is affirmative, what could mean such

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21 Hence the meaning of statements like these by Goebbels: "In the world of absolute fatality within which Hitler moves, nothing makes sense anymore, neither good nor evil, neither time nor space, and what other men call 'success' cannot be used as a criterion (...) Hitler is likely to end in catastrophe" (Apud in Heiber, 2013).

22 Esposito, 2008, p. 116

23 See Thomas Hobbes about "the diseases of a commonwealth" in the chapter XXIX of Hobbes, 2017.

symmetry with the fascist suicidal state? If we accept, with Wolfgang Streeck,²⁴ that contemporary capitalism, with its link between continuous low growth, chronic indebtedness and an explosion of inequality, entered into an irreversible process of decomposition, unable to guarantee any form of systemic stability, without however existing for while some other consolidated alternative to replace it, could we not argue that such a terminal horizon would require some form of generalized mutation in the relationship between protection and government, in order to allow a certain possibility of stabilization in the decomposition? Would it not be necessary some form of "normalization" of the decomposition of social macro-structures and, consequently, of disinvestment in the expectations of protection directed at the state, which implies tacit acceptance of the exponential increase in the generalized level of risk in the face of death? And, finally, such divestment would not require a certain form of mutation in the affects that sustain the social body, as the implosion of all generic solidarity, in addition to a certain structural psychic mutation from the generalization of identification to figures or processes that legitimize the violence of such an implosion?

Taking these questions into consideration, it would be the case to defend that there is something paradigmatic in the notion of suicidal state that seems to return today in global laboratories of authoritarian neoliberalism, such as Brazil. Everything is happening as if the suicidal state returned as a model of "normal functioning" of a situation in perpetual crisis. For it is a case of defending the thesis that humanitarian catastrophes like that produced by the Brazilian government in the face of the pandemic (second country in the world in number of deaths, even in the face of evident underreporting; total absence of federal protection policies; complete absence of mourning and social commotion for the deaths) work as part of a policy of pressure towards paradigmatic changes in the exercise of power. Such changes may indicate deeper global recompositions aiming at adapting to the socio-economic processes led by the neoliberal horizon and its reduced horizon of expectations. In turn, they indicate a consolidation of indifference and disaffection as a fundamental social affect, as fundamental elements for the generalization of psychic mutations such as those described, each in its own way, by Adorno and Guattari.

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24 Streeck, 2015. Note that Streeck's argument does not require that social macro-structures have, in fact, functioned as a device for social stabilization and limitation of impoverishment. They just need to preserve the belief that political struggles that respect institutional frameworks can, at some point, produce conditions for general principles of redistribution. The so-called "welfare state" produced its alleged limitation of impoverishment only in certain central countries of capitalism, preserving logics of colonial domination until the end of the sixties and transferring precariousness to masses of poor immigrants. But it managed to lead significant sectors of the organized working class to believe that political struggles within the institutional horizon of liberal democracy could lead to structural changes in income and wealth sharing. In turn, those, at that time, linked to processes of revolutionary transformation shared clear and hegemonic horizons of collective action, a fact that begins to decline effectively with the historical end of the cycle of revolutions (the last being in Nicaragua in 1979).

Lets initially insist on some specificities of the Brazilian situation in order to understand its privileged position to analyze this phenomenon. As Celso Furtado will recall, Brazil was a country created from the implementation of the economic cell of the primary-exporting slave plantation on American soil.²⁵ Before being a settlement colonization, it was a question of developing, for the first time, a new form of economic order linked to export production and the massive use of slave labor. Let us remember how the Portuguese empire will be the first to engage in the transatlantic slave trade, reaching a quasi-monopoly position in the middle of the 16th century. 35% of all slaves transported to the Americas were directed to Brazil. As the slave plantation is the elementary cell of Brazilian society, as Brazil was the last American country to abolish slavery, it will not be strange to conceive of the country as the greatest colonial necropolitics experiment in modern history.

These characteristics allowed the Brazilian state to develop a technology for the disappearance, extermination and execution of vulnerable sectors of the population (original people, poor, blacks) that will prove resilient within its history, creating the technical conditions for the management of a “permanent counterrevolution.”²⁶ This technology will be exponentially developed in the military dictatorship (1964-1984), through the systematic use of “forced disappearance” techniques against opponents of the regime, in an adaptation of the practices of “revolutionary war” developed in the colonial struggles in Indochina and Algeria.²⁷ As Brazil was one of the rare cases in Latin America of a country without transitional justice and judgment of crimes of the military dictatorship, such devices could remain in the normal practices of the State's police apparatus during the post-dictatorship period to the present day.²⁸ As an example of the impact of such permanence, Brazil will be the only country in Latin America where cases of police torture will increase in relation to such cases during the military dictatorship.²⁹

It should therefore not be seen as a fluke that a country with such social structures serves as a laboratory for the development of authoritarian neoliberalism, now no longer under a dictatorial layer, as occurred in Pinochet's Chile, but in an allegedly “democratic” environment.³⁰ We know how the reconstruction of social life by neoliberal

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25 FURTADO, 2020

26 See Fernandes, 1987

27 Ver Duarte-Plon, 2016; Franco, forthcoming

28 See Safatle and Telles, 2010

29 Sikkink, Kathryn & Marchesi, Bridget. 2015

30 About such development and the relations between fascism and neoliberalism, see Chamayou, 2018.

rationality requires the reconfiguration of social relations based on a very peculiar concept of “individual freedom.” Such freedom requires a society that imploded all its relations, current and potential, of generic solidarity. This implosion will see no problem in defending a conception of freedom that, in certain “exceptional” circumstances, will take place as a complete disengagement from protection facing the imminent death of expressive sectors of the population marked by historical relations of spoliation. The soil for the flowering of such a conception of freedom needs to be marked by repeated violence and systematic indifference.

Let us remember some fundamental features of freedom within the neoliberal ideology. We know how neoliberalism is not just an ideology of economic policies, but also an kind of ethical horizon (organized in a violent way through the massive intervention of the state in the depoliticization of social life) that aims to subject all demands of justice to imperatives of freedom. In fact, freedom appears as a fundamental axis for legitimizing both government actions and ways of relating to oneself. Demands of justice, whether they are demands for redistributive justice or social reparation justice, must be submitted to the uncompromising defense of freedom. In a way, we can even say that the rationality of economic actions is not analyzed in terms of growth production of wealth and goods to a bigger number of people, neither in terms of social security, of equity, but in terms of their ability to achieve freedom. And if we ask about what is meant by freedom in this context, we will find freedom as an expression of proprietary individuals, as an exercise of self-ownership.

It is with such articulation in mind that we should read, for example, the beginning of the text that presented the objectives of the *Mont Pélérin Society*, the first group formed in the forties to spread neoliberal ideals:

The central values of civilization are in danger... The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law.³¹

Whence the exhortation to explain the alleged current crisis from its “moral and economic origins.” This double articulation is extremely significant. The aforementioned view of history that would deny any absolute moral standard and that would be growing would be the collectivist and socialist ideologies that refuse the primacy of private property. We are in the forties, communism is expanding and even capitalist countries adopt hybrid models, such as the Scandinavian model, or characterized by strong doses of state interventionism of a Keynesian nature.

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31 Apud Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015, p. 25

The above excerpt is interesting because it shows how the refusal of the primacy of private property and competitiveness is not only understood as an economic mistake that could bring inefficiency and backwardness, but mainly as a moral lack capable of endangering the central values of western civilization. For this reason, its defense must not only be based on its alleged economic efficiency in face of the imperatives of wealth production. It must take place through the moral exhortation of values imbued with free enterprise, “independence” in relation to the State and the alleged individual self-determination. We must carry out the moral obligation of a society of individuals free from the tutelage of anyone, capable of enjoying their property as they see fit and certain that violations of this fundamental right will be promptly punished. For the right to private property would be: “the most important guarantee for freedom,” as Hayek will say. This explains why in the “free society” the individual would always have the possibility of (economic) choice, in contrast to the so-called “collectivist” models, where “the individual is exempt from responsibility”, models that will fail for being “antimoral in its effects, however lofty the ideals to which it owes its birth”³². As we see, decisions are justified in terms of “responsibility,” “majority,” “independence.” That is, the terms are all moral, not economic.

The freedom that realize itself as genocide

“Much important than life itself, it is our freedom.” This statement is not from Hayek, but from the current president of Brazil, justifying his analysis that the policies to restrict circulation and activities developed to combat the pandemic would be an “attack on freedom.” Leaving aside the elementary contradiction that freedom without life is not freedom at all, there is the realization, more or less consequential, of the neoliberal conception of “responsibility,” “majority,” and “independence.” We saw something similar when American protesters took the streets with posters that showed a mask inside a prohibited sign with the inscription “my body, my rules.” The same reasoning served as a basis for German protesters to demand the “right to be infected.”

The logic is clear and there is no denying a certain consistency. Since “freedom” is something that some understand as the property I have over myself, over my body, no one could compel me to wear a medical mask, to stay at home, to take care of my body, unless he has my consent for this. After all, as Mr. Bolsonaro said on another occasion: “if I get infected, it's my problem.”

We could counter-argue by saying that, even admitting freedom as self-ownership, we should relativize it stating that: “the exercise of my self-ownership must be limited by the risk concerning other's life.” However, there will always be those who will ask (and, again, with some consistency): but who decides what are the “relevant risks” to the other? Why should I

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32 Hayek, 2007, p. 217

admit that the state or scientists who pose themselves as oracular sages have decided what is a “relevant risk”? That is, who has the recognized authority to define what affects my body without I having consented to recognize that authority myself?

Let us note how the generalization of a logic of this nature accounts for the perception that the macro-structures of social protection are in decline and that a possible way out would be the massive shift of responsibility and action towards micro-structures, such as families and individuals. Wasn't that, after all, Margareth Thatcher's biggest slogan: “There is no such thing as society, there are just individuals and families”? But if this is the case, how can we demand protection from the state at exceptional times, such as those produced by pandemics? Is it not, in fact, a “moral lack” that indicates a lack of courage and a willingness to work and struggle? It would be better, then, to describe the practices of confinement and isolation as “cowardice”, as was systematically the case in Brazil.

Thus, in the name of defending freedom and decomposing social protection macro-structures, the state can subject populations to a suicidal dynamic, as it is based on indifference to the brutal increase in the risks of “violent death,” to speak like Hobbes. Of course, this risk is lessened by access to the market, that is, access to private health and protection systems. The certainty of privileged access to such systems establish a differentiated sharing of risks, although it cannot cancel out the general increase in exposure to the risk of death. It defines a different impact of risk according to social classes, creating completely different curves of contagion and death, between the wealthy and the poor classes.³³ However, it does not eliminate the naturalization of a new level of social exposure to death for the entire population and the acceptance of such an increase by significant sections of the population, and this is the fundamental fact here.

Such a process requires dynamics of disaffection that cannot occur if society is engaged in public mourning and civic commotion. Therefore, it is necessary to produce the systematic disappearance of dead bodies. This happens through counter-information (systematic government work to discredit the numbers of dead, already underreported), simple denial (claiming that the dead classified as dead by COVID-19 are, in fact, victims of other diseases), refusal explicit in raising awareness of the dead (continuous statements by federal authorities, mainly by the president of the republic, that “life goes on”, “everyone dies”), among other strategies. The military tactic of “forced disappearance” returns as a general policy in the government populations.

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33 According to studies carried out in the city of São Paulo, between the months of May and June, the seroprevalence of infection by the SARS-CoV-2 virus is 2.5 times higher in the poorest districts (Projeto SoroEpi MSP: [https:// www. monitoramentocovid19.org/](https://www.monitoramentocovid19.org/))

Let us note how we come back to a situation that we saw earlier with Neumann's analysis of the Nazi state. At the time, we saw how the use of permanent war, with its constant calls for sacrifice and catastrophe, appeared as a response to a state in disintegration, which arises after the impossibility of liberal democracy to account for the social struggles that were becoming more radical. What appears in its place is an apparatus crossed by continuous struggle between groups, in a completely unstable balance and which needs internal and external war as a condition for survival.

In our present case, the diagnosis of loss of the capacity for conflict mediation by the institutional apparatus of liberal democracy is increasingly evident. This loss is not due to some form of “populist regression” proper to the alleged mobilization of identity affects. It is the result of the immanent limitations of liberal democracy and its unfulfilled redistributive promises. In this horizon, one possible and seductive path is the acceptance of the collapse of the entire macro-structure of protection and the strengthening of micro-structures as a horizon of support. In the Brazilian case, this process was driven by the constitution of financial aid for the direct transfer of income, a transfer financed, in fact, by the systematic decomposition of budgets destined to universalist public policies (public health system, public universities, pensions). The logic follows the principle that the state has already done its part by transferring emergency aid, now each individual must exercise their individual ability to survive.

The complement of this process can be the radicalization of the logic of self-ownership, without the increased risk in relation to death by disengagement from the state being able to stop this process. Thus, we can say that we entered into a suicidal logic without the need for a direct war. If it proves to be effective, such logic may tend to be the norm in other horizons of application of neoliberal policies. But perhaps, in this way, neoliberalism has shown us what many of us already knew, namely, that the economy is nothing more than the continuation of war by other means.

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Beyond the Necropolitics Principle...

Viral Encounter: Experiences, Lessons, and Options

Göran Therborn

Abstract: The present essay deals with the problem of the pandemic COVID-19, focusing on socio-economic and geo-political aspects. It begins with a discussion of the on-going pandemic with regard to the inequalities it has rendered visible and deepened further; the poverty it has ignited. It goes on in discussing the ways in which the states have handled the pandemic, with their challenges and failures posed by the coronavirus. At the end, the present work outlines the prospects of the emergence of the post-Western world, as well as more unequal and more divided.

Keywords: pandemic, crisis, working class, inequality, post-Western world

The Pandemic Experience, Its Lessons and its Sociopolitical Consequences

The COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2021? will be a landmark of world history, because of its planetary simultaneity and because of its geopolitical and social effects, which have had more impact than its contagion and mortality. The so-called Spanish flu – actually from Kansas, USA – of 1918-19 was much more devastating in terms of human lives. How many remains unknown, but the most elaborate estimate says at least 49 million. The heaviest losses were in British colonies, contagion carried by colonial soldiers returning from World War in Europe. India lost 18.5 lives; USA 680,000.

The pandemic has been, and is, an experience of suffering and loss for millions of people around the planet. For us privileged survivors, it has been a life-engraving learning experience. It has shown us the historical impact of contingency, the planetary common and its eradicable divisions, the ephemera of many middle class dreams, and the fragility of all ordinary peoples' lives in a world of recurrent pandemics and economic crashes under the clouds of approaching climate catastrophes. Our encounter with COVID-19 has accelerated the current dynamic of the world, towards ever more inequality and privileges for a few, towards a post-Western century. It has sharpened the ecological, social, and political alternatives and has raised the stakes, to the point of forcing us to make a clear choice between war and peace, facing the possibility of a US-China war.

Pandemic Inequalities

The pandemic experience is one of differential vulnerability and unequal outcomes. The coronavirus and its management are operating as amplifiers of prevailing social divides, of age, ethnicity, gender, and class, and tendencies, while also creating new cut-ups through combinations of different viral exposure and economic-social situation. The rich are becoming richer, and the poor poorer; the fortunate are becoming more fortunate, and the unfortunate are becoming more miserable.

115 million more people have been pushed into extreme poverty (living on less than \$1.90 a day), making a global total of about 800 million (according to the president of the World Bank last September). At the same time, the stock exchanges of New York and Shanghai are rising to record values, fed by the “stimuli” disbursed by central banks and governments. Children are more resilient to Corona than adults, but when schools close children without internet lose their education. The educational divide widens; a divide that may mark a generation. Even in rich countries like the UK and the US, the loss of school lunches means less to eat for many. In mid-July, one in seven of US households with children reported insufficient food, in August one in eight, the US Bureau of the Census found in its surveys. Women and young adults are more resilient to COVID-19 than men and older adults. But both the former are more likely to lose their jobs and being left out of employment. Poor ethnic minorities, in rich as well as poor countries, are more vulnerable to contagion, due to their mode of livelihood and/or housing conditions.

Upon the existing class structure a new, binary structuration is imposed. Among the owners and executives of capital, all very well protected from virus and from loss of position and income, there is a new sectoral divide. In the first seven months of this year, the stocks of the five BigTech corporations, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft, and Facebook rose by 37 per cent, that is, making their owners – among them the richest men on earth – 37% richer, whereas the shares of all the others on the Standard & Poor list of 500 big US corporations declined by six per cent. Since January 1st 2020 the tech-dominated US Nasdaq stock exchange has increased 25 percent in value. Many smaller businesses are going bankrupt.

Among employees, there is an upper-middle class, who are able to keep their job, their salary, and their safety by working from home. Employees with the highest salaries have the lowest risk of unemployment. Then there is an “essential” service class, caring for, feeding, and protecting the more privileged classes and their parents, to a nationally varying extent also the less privileged. They have to work harder than ever, they get their income, but little safety, running big risks of becoming infected. The ordinary working class is also sliced up into two. On one side there are workers with formerly a full-time stable job, now mostly unemployed but furloughed with a twenty to forty per cent cut in their income, if they are lucky to be Europeans, or receivers of some kind unemployment compensation. At the bottom you have the previous temporary workers in the North, and the so-called informal, rights-less workers in the South, who have lost their livelihood, although they may get some public help. For the rest they have to ask for charity.

Because of its simultaneous global character, the COVID-19 pandemic is probably the largest unequalizer in modern history. It is everywhere driving intra-national inequality. Its effects on inter-national inequality remain to be measured up, although it is already clear that the

chasm between the world's rich and poor households has widened even further.

State Pictures

The uneven pandemic challenge threw a flashlight on governments and states, their style of power, their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. On the blustering, capricious, and incompetent governments of Brazil, UK, USA and others, on the lethally brutal deployment of police and military in, e.g., India, Kenya, the Philippines, and South Africa, the advanced digital surveillance in China and South Korea, and, at the other end, the low-key governmentality of Sweden, implementing the advice of its Public Health Authority with non-policed closures and social distancing. At the same time the virus outbreak revealed the hollowness of the Swedish welfare state after decades of municipalization, privatization, and neoliberalization, under Social Democratic as well as bourgeois governments. They had fragmented public health care, handed over much old age care to corporate capital accumulation, promoted by right-wing regional and local governments, particularly and fatally in highly virus-exposed Stockholm.

Government-population relations were also highlighted. The nationally unprecedented political polarization in the US, the oppositional politicization of the pandemic management in many Latin American countries, in Argentina most aggressively, and in Spain, the enduring popularity of Narendra Modi, despite his brusque and brutal lockdown of India, the gradually increasing frustration and anger in several European countries, the government-opposition concert in Scandinavia, and the trustful popular obedience in East Asia.

There has also been an acceleration, diffusion, and deployment of state surveillance capacity. Digital mass surveillance is a US invention. From Edward Snowden we learnt that the US secret services (NSA and CIA) are monitoring all internet and all telephone communication on the planet. However, this is discrete, secret surveillance, meant to be unknown by the population, especially of the United States who would be most angered by such updated police state practices. Therefore, the machinery has not been used in the US for tracing COVID-19 contagion and contact risks. Instead, pandemic surveillance has been led from East Asia, China with Taiwan and Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore, which are technologically advanced and have disciplined communitarian and digitally savvy populations. From there, contact tracing apps spread massively across Eurasia, from Indonesia and India to Norway and Iceland.

Lessons

The first and most obvious lesson is the fragility of human civilization even at high levels of productivity and consumption and with technological skills, capable even of entering and supplementing the

human brain. By industrial animal husbandry and by the destruction of many animal habitats, humanity has come closer, more exposed, to the viral world with its limitless supply of malign viruses. This microscopic viral experience arrives as we are about to learn the macroscopic forces of a wounded planet – the consequences of climate change – which are reminding us of their existence with massive flooding in Africa and Asia, with aggressive wildfires in Australia and California and Oregon, and with a melting Arctic.

The second hard lesson is the political vulnerability of human solidarity and the dysfunctionality of the current geopolitics of states. In the national panics of late March and April, old international cooperation and alliances suddenly meant nothing, as borders were suddenly closed, even between the Nordic countries, which have been in a passport union since 1952. Movements of paid for protective gear within the EU were stopped (temporarily), and NATO allies USA and France were competing for protective gear on the tarmac of airports, in Bangkok and in France.

At the level of policy, there are above all two lessons. The health of populations depend crucially on alert and knowledgeable governments with strong public health care systems. Two groups of countries were successful in coping with the viral attack because of early and well-orchestrated interventions: the epidemic-experienced, strong, and digitally highly skilled developmental states of East Asia, and the foresighted, well-organized Nordic welfare states, except Sweden but together with the antipodal easily isolated sister government of New Zealand. Privatizations have turned out a drain and a weakness. Private old age homes became houses of death under the pandemic, in Bergamo Italy, in Madrid, in Belgium, in Stockholm, in Seattle and New York, and further. Private capital accumulation has no interest in storing protective equipment, nor in developing vaccines for popular diseases.

Secondly, developed states in the current contexts of low inflation and interest rates, have discovered their enormous economic capacity to borrow and print money. In the face of the pandemic, there were suddenly ample public resources of support available, and even in countries like Trumpist USA and Bolsonaro Brazil not only for business bailouts but also for unemployment compensation. Tory “austerity” was demonstrated not being an economic constraint but an ideological right-wing option, suddenly passé.

A New World Emerging: Post-Western

The world after Corona will be an angry, more divided, and increasingly post-Western world. There will be much anger over the losses and inequalities of the pandemic, and over the incompetence and arrogance of many governments. What form and direction this anger will take is impossible to predict, however, due to the fractured multidimensionality of post- and pre-industrial politics. There are hardly any larg

programmatically egalitarian movements and parties around, so the field is open for all kinds of political entrepreneurs, not excluding committed egalitarians though.

The world after Corona will no longer be a world of neoliberal globalization and of unchallenged US and Western supremacy and domination. This was something in the air after the Millennium turn, when inter-national inequality began to bend down, for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, and after the Western 2008 financial crisis. But 2020 will probably be remembered as the year of a geopolitical tipping point. The pandemic laid bare the weakness of the Western powers in handling it, both in terms of health and in economic terms, in comparison with China, and at least with respect to coping with the virus also when compared to the whole of East Asia.

By midnight Greenwich Mean Time on October 1 2020, the death toll per million inhabitants from COVID-19 in the big countries of East Asia was, 3 in China, 12 in Japan, 8 in South Korea, and 0.4 in Vietnam, on average 5.9. Among the big powers of NATO the corresponding figures were USA 640, Germany 114, UK 621, and France 493, on average 489, i.e., 86 times higher than in East Asia. In relation to the population, deaths in the USA were 213 times the number in China. (www.worldometers.info/coronavirus) The difference approximates the casualty ratio between colonial and indigenous forces in the Euro-American colonial wars, this time inverted.

Economically, according to all mid-late September international estimates, world GDP will decline by 4-5% in 2020. Alone among the large G20 economies, and in the whole world almost, China is growing in 2020, by about 2% – returning to strong growth in 2021 – while the US will decline by 4%, the Eurozone by 8%, and the UK and India by 10%. By early September, Chinese exports are alone back at 2019 levels, ironically after a 20 per cent increase of exports to the United States (according to the OECD).

In frustration over its own failures, the US abdicated from cooperative world leadership by leaving the WHO in the midst of the pandemic, as it had already on climate change, and declared economic and ideological war against China. The outcome of that is still open, but it means the end of the post-World War II economic pax Americana. Pandemic experiences provided the triggering context for an economic and ideological war in gestation, once it became obvious that China was becoming a big power without becoming a second USA.

After the pandemic a post-Western century is likely to emerge. US military and economic domination will not go away any time soon, but its world hegemony is slipping, and the 21st century will see the big Asian elephants enter centre stage, China and India each with a population four times that of the US, Indonesia three times that of Germany, and four other Asian countries more populous than Germany. To follow this epochal shift will be a fascinating experience, for curious citizens of the world as well as

for social scientists, but also a cognitive and civic challenge.

The new Cold War has already started, and it will have its generous share of prejudice, deliberate disinformation, and ideological distortion. There will be great pressure to conform, to the Western or to the Eastern side. And many journalists, scholars, and politicians will enrol enthusiastically as warriors. For those who don't want to enrol, particular cognitive efforts, skepticism, and vigilance will be needed.

The US-China conflict will pose great problems for the climate movement, subverting the chances of planetary climate agreements. A US-China war would be disastrous for the planet, hindering necessary concerted planetary action, even if the war were to be militarily limited. Therefore, the climate movement will have to become also a neutralist peace movement.

"1945" or "1932"? The Context and the Options after the Pandemic

How the pandemic will end is still unknown. Will it be defeated or will it have to be accommodated? What shape will the economic crisis and recovery take, a V, a U, or an L, or a K? In other words, a rapid return to normalcy, a slow recovery, a prolonged recession, or an aftermath extra socially polarized between top and bottom added to the pandemic polarization? In any case, because of its unique planetary grip, the Corona pandemic is likely to become a historical landmark, meaning that there will be an important after as well as a before.

Modern North Atlantic history has two previous compressed such after moments, 1932, after the outbreak of the (continuing) 1929-31 Depression, and 1945, after the end of WWII. 1919-20 is another candidate, but its most dramatic outcomes, in some countries, national independence, parliamentary democracy with universal or male suffrage, and socialist revolutions are none of them likely to be central to post-COVID-19.

In the early stages of the pandemic, "1945" looked like a possible end, at least in some parts of the Americas and Europe. Neoliberal marketization and privatization obviously could not cope. On April 3 the Editorial Board of the *Financial Times* declared: "Radical reforms are required to forge a society that will work for all. Governments will have to accept a more active role in the economy. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities, and look for ways to make labour markets less insecure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda.... Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix."

The founder and director of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Klaus Schwab, is expecting "a period of massive wealth redistribution from the rich to the poor and from capital to labour", and the "death-knell to neoliberalism", but only after "massive social turmoil."¹

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¹ Schwab and Malleret 2020, pp.78, 83

This progressive reform outlook is reminiscent of the overwhelming rejection of miserly pre-Keynesian Conservatism and Liberalism in 1945. Von Hayek's 1944 idea then that a Social Democratic welfare state would be a "Road to Serfdom" was ridiculous, and so have the contemporary claims of neoliberalism come to be.

A better, more egalitarian world seemed possible, seriously confronting the threats of climate warming, with public health and old age care for all, an education system which gave all pupils and students an equal chance, a progressive taxation which kept inequality in check and could finance public services and security for everybody, and a reformed capitalism no longer driven by shareholder value. A world also committed to combat racism, sexism. The spirit of 1945 is still there in FT's call for a "new Social Contract" in World Economic Forum planning for a "Great Reset", and among progressive think tanks in many countries.

However, a "1945" scenario implies that the evil forces of inequality and violence have all been decisively defeated, in historical 1945 they had literally been burnt to ashes in Berlin and Tokyo. This is unlikely to be the case when this pandemic ends.

With the sharpening of geopolitical conflicts as well as of intra-national conflicts, the end of the pandemic crisis is more likely to land us in a "1932" situation, which means a broader range of outcomes, including disastrous ones. Then there were three major options. One was progressive social reform, chosen in USA and the Scandinavian countries. Another was violent authoritarianism, of which Nazism-Fascism was one variant, but more common was a reactionary sub-current, triumphant in Japan, in Eastern and Southern Europe (except Fascist Italy), with Latin American off-shoots. A third variant was an anal conservatism, plodding through a darkening crisis with an upper-class insouciance from a bygone time, e.g. in Britain and in France (before the interlude of the Popular Front).

A 2020s Green New Deal or social democracy would be a rational option, egalitarian, ecological, non-violent, listening to the climate experts and to a phalanx of distinguished egalitarian economists – headed by Thomas Piketty and including four recent Nobel Laureates, Joseph Stiglitz, Angus Deaton, Abhijit Banerjee, and Esther Duflo – the first in the history of the discipline. Above all, it would be a humane politics recognizing, heeding, and committed to the non-privileged people of humankind.

Where are the political forces strong enough to carry this out? The answer remains open. There is support all over the world, and there will be struggles for post-pandemic radical reforms, but there will also be fierce resistance against transforming existing power structures and privileges.

The authoritarian, inequalitarian, and violent, if not properly Fascist, forces today have certainly not been crushed. We had better not forget that these forces took the world to World War II. Nor, that part of the story

behind both WWI and WWII was that rising powers were challenging existing world rulers, Germany challenging Britain, Japan challenging US. Today, the rise of China is seen as an unacceptable threat by the main spectrum of political influencers in the US, and increasingly also in the EU, Britain, and Japan.

And like in 1932, there is today the default option of conservatives, of doing little or nothing but trying to preserve the status quo on a wounded planet burning with drought, ablaze with wildfires, and drenched by flooding – at the same time. The current world is mostly governed by conservative governments, almost all Asia, with the uncertain exception of China, virtually all Africa, most of Latin America – where the two major exceptions, Argentina and Mexico, are particularly weakened by the effects of the pandemic – North America, with either Biden or Trump, most of Europe outside Iberia and a couple of Arctic outposts (Denmark and Sweden). However, in the current, more fluid political landscapes conservatism is neither invulnerable in front of, nor immune to radical social movements, particularly ecological movements.

At the end of the pandemic there will be an option of equality, climate adaptation, and peace – hardly of social revolution – but only as an option dependent on contingent forces and leadership still to be constituted. As in 1932 there will be other options, already discernible and more widely offered, likely leading to prolonged misery for the non-privileged and to human disaster, by war or by climate catastrophe – or both.

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Last Resorts: Jottings on the Pandemic State

Alberto Toscano

Abstract: This essay explores various theorists' response to the hypertrophies, failures and antinomies of state power brought to the fore by the political response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It reflects critically on the thesis that the pandemic has served as a wedge for an epochal consolidation of a biosecurity state, as well as on the contention that a return of the state's potentially progressive biopolitical prerogatives is currently in effect. In order to excavate our contradictory desire and/or fear of the state, as well as the politically confused imperatives of lockdown and liberation, it explores the arguments advanced by value-critics regarding the complementary hostility of state and capital, and the political-economic crisis tendencies behind the contemporary 'primacy of politics'. By way of conclusion, it puts these critical arguments against state-fetishism into dialogue with the 'tragic instrumentalist' thesis that it is only by refunctioning the state's capacities for action that our chronic emergencies might find some emancipatory outlet.

Keywords: Covid-19, critique of value, pandemic, Anselm Jappe, Andreas Malm, the state

Countless commentators have remarked upon the revelatory virtues of the ongoing pandemic, acting, to select a particularly felicitous metaphor, in a manner akin to 'a radioactive element injected into the veins for an x-ray of blood flow'.¹ If these months have been apocalyptic, it has also been in the etymological, Biblical sense (the Greek *apokaluptein*) of uncovering things unseen – though the uncovering has often implicated that which was hiding in plain sight.

Among the dimensions of our material and psychic life that have been intensely magnified by the protracted emergency is our relation to the state. From a certain vantage, this is entirely unsurprising, as the legitimacy of the modern state has largely hinged on its (differential, exclusive, racialised, gendered, and sometimes lethal) capacity to secure the reproduction of the biological bases of political life, a function that has been repeatedly crystallised and augmented in historical encounters with pandemics. The legitimacy of the modern age and of the modern state is in great part a biopolitical and an epidemiological legitimacy.² To cite authorities from Cicero to Hobbes, to numberless constitutional and regulatory documents, *Salus populi suprema lex esto* – in other words, political authority is indissociable from public health. That Latin motto is arguably hardwired into our common sense regarding the very rationale for the concentration and centralisation of power.

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¹Winant, 2020.

²Toscano, 2020.

According to the most dire diagnoses of our moment, the SARS-CoV-2 has witnessed an acceleration in our own investments and complicities with this biopolitical form of legitimacy, together with a formidable augmentation in the state's powers of both individual discipline and individual control, to allude to a Deleuzian distinction that seems to be largely collapsing in the technologically dense and layered world of (self-)isolation measures. This would be the 'Great Transformation' of 2020, in which sovereign and administrative powers have seized the occasion of a state of exception pervading our social atmosphere like the airborne droplets we so dread, in order to engage a wholesale mutation in our paradigms of political life – compelling each and every one of us (*omnes et singulatim*), through a 'juridical-religious obligation' to health, to comply with the infinitely plastic and undeniable demands of *biosecurity*.³

Largely resonating with this vision of an epochal turn – in which the spectacular isolation of social atoms whose only religion is health converges with a state bent on fully expropriating any residue of agency from its simulacrum of citizenry – is the view that the pandemic is the moment of the full actualisation of sovereign power's own utopian scenarios. With an acerbic nod to Macron's turn as the Napoleon of Covid, Julien Coupat and his co-authors declare:

We have seen the Sovereign of the republic realize his dream of gathering into a mass all of his subjects—perfectly separated between the four walls of their homes and in front of their screens—reduced finally to his exclusive contemplation. We have seen *the Leviathan realized*.⁴

It might be worth noting that Agamben and Coupat write from within regimes of epidemiological emergency profoundly marked by particular *habits* (and not just *reasons*) of state – the penchant of the French and Italian state to militarise the public sphere at all opportunities, and to imagine that machine guns may be an apt response to regulating a public health response, surely playing a role. It is difficult to gainsay an acceleration – in a context of often rational and indeed even altruistic, if not unambiguous, compliance – in the colonisation of our life-worlds by the joint manoeuvres of the security state and surveillance capitalism (the 'coronopticon'⁵). A dose of sobriety is in order, however about the threats but also the potentials that this 'return of the state' involves. In an early text about the pandemic, castigating a certain obsession of the

3 Agamben, 2020, pp. 12-13.

4 Coupat et al., 2020.

5 The Economist, 2020.

French Left with the malevolent figure of Macron, Alain Badiou noted that:

Faced with an epidemic this kind of statist reflex is inevitable. That is why, contrary to what some say, the declarations by Macron or Prime Minister Edouard Philippe regarding the return of the 'welfare' state, spending to support people out of work, or to aid the self-employed whose shops have been shut, demanding 100 or 200 billion from the state coffers, and even the announcement of 'nationalisations' – none of this is surprising or paradoxical. It follows that Macron's metaphor, 'we are at war', is correct: in war or epidemic, the state is compelled, sometimes trespassing the normal run of its class nature, to undertake practices that are both more authoritarian and more generally targeted, in order to avoid a strategic catastrophe. This is an entirely logical consequence of the situation, the aim of which is to stifle the epidemic – to win the war, to borrow once again Macron's metaphor – with the greatest certainty possible, while remaining within the established social order. This is no laughing matter, it is a necessity imposed by the diffusion of a lethal process that intersects nature (whence the preeminent role of scientists in the matter) and the social order (whence the authoritarian intervention, and it couldn't be otherwise, of the state).

We can also add to this Marco D'Eramo's important correction to Agamben's metaphysical framing of emergency powers in a unilinear philosophy of history, namely that 'not all states of exception are the same' – not least because, contra Agamben (and as we'll explore further below), 'domination is not one-dimensional. It is not just control and surveillance; it is also exploitation and extraction'. To realise the latter is also to be sensitive to the ways in which the pandemic, far from serving as a welcome crisis to enact a further monopolisation of (bio)power, 'has caught the ruling classes off guard', especially to the extent that 'they have not yet grasped the recession that awaits us and its capacity to upend economic orthodoxies'.⁶ Some of this has also manifested itself in what could be termed the depressive phase of the desire for the state, the moment that reveals 'the *sad passion of being well-governed* as the obligation to be *perpetually disappointed*'.⁷

What I'd like to briefly explore is this statist reflex, in its political, economic but also ideological dimensions. Contrary to interpretations that would see our moment as one of the untrammelled affirmation of

6 D'Eramo, 2020, pp. 25-7. See also Watkins, 2020.

7 Coupat et al., 2020.

invasive biopower under the cover of public health, the role of the state in our conjuncture – as well as how it is perceived, repelled or demanded – is marked by deep ambivalences, we might even say contradictions. Many have noted, for instance, the curious ideological chiasmus whereby the political bearers of some of the most concerning authoritarian trends in the present (Trump, Bolsonaro and their coteries) have been the least interested in turning a public health emergency into an occasion for the militarisation of everyday life, while many Leftists and liberals have been clamouring for a greater use of the state's repressive and juridical resources to secure collective well-being.

None of this is entirely mysterious – after all, contemporary fascistic reflexes are entangled with neoliberalism's most anti-democratic instincts, its anti-social Darwinism (fascisms of freedom are all the rage), while the experience and idea of the *welfare state* remains the residual horizon of most progressive politics. Yet it does point to the intersection of (at least) two contradictions – namely the one between the *desire for the state* and the (often all-too justified) *fear of the state*, on the one hand, and between the (momentary) *primacy of the state* and the (structuring) *primacy of the economic*, on the other. Before considering what I think is the most illuminating intervention to date in what concerns the diagnosis of the lived antinomies of the pandemic state, Anselm Jappe et al.'s *De Virus Illustribus*, it is worth mentioning one often neglected dimension of the practical contradictions faced by state power in the Covid conjuncture. Notwithstanding what initially appeared as a centralisation and nationalisation of the public health crisis, giving the lie to horizons of coordinated imperial governance (which some might have erroneously imagined as revenant, against neo-populist and sovereigntist temptations, in the face of a *global* pandemic), the virus's course through the circulatory system of the body politic has increasingly revealed the fault-lines internal to the nation-state.

Not just in federal states, biopolitical legitimacy has turned out to be deeply contentious across different levels of administrative and coercive power, and only seemingly or fleetingly monopolised by the executive centre. Mayors, governors, local health authorities, alternative bodies of epidemiological expertise, or even gangs and militias (as in the well-publicised case of Brazilian *favelas*⁸) have vied for control over the handling of the public health response – something which is in keeping with the importance of local, grassroots or communal knowledge and agency to epidemiological responses.⁹ For all the pomp and pastiche of sovereign power, no medical monarch has arisen. What we've seen are at best locally and provisionally persuasive performances of an authority

8 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 57-8.

9 Toscano, 2020.

infused with generally cautious claims of scientific expertise (contra Agamben's bombastic claims about the current 'religion' of scientific expertise and its attendant heresies, the authority of public health experts seems far too couched in precaution and probabilism to count as faith).

While some (generally affluent) states and their leaders – through a deft balancing act between the imperatives of care and control – have temporarily managed to accumulate political capital from their pandemic management, contentions over jurisdiction,¹⁰ authority and expertise, overlaid on the protracted hollowing out of investment in political representation, suggest more acephalous visions of the Leviathan. As Massimo De Carolis has judiciously observed:

in no case will a conspiracy, a Spectre, or some more or less hidden personification of Power dissolve our doubt. Social phenomena do not have a director [*regia*], but are the result of an indeterminate number of independent forces and drives. There are no puppeteers, but only puppets that push the theatre, each in his own way, with more or less force, in one direction or another, often in spite of their own conscious intentions.¹¹

If the current conjuncture of planetary emergency politics does not betoken simply a monolithic phase-shift in the monopolisation (and therefore expropriation or alienation) of social power, is there a better way to ground and understand the antinomic character of both states' actions vis-à-vis the pandemic and of our own perception thereof? Anselm Jappe and his co-authors, building on the 'critique of value-dissociation' elaborated by Robert Kurz and Roswitha Scholz, have provided a fruitful framing of this question, which can contribute to elucidate our predicament, as well as the limits of extant theoretical responses. The starting point is limpid enough: drawing on a Marxian critique of political economy (albeit one that does not subsume a critique of patriarchy and the 'dissociation' of a feminised sphere of reproduction,¹² something I cannot further explore in these notes), *De Virus Illustribus* argues that the tenet of a 'return of the state' – whether viewed in anti-authoritarian horror or in welfarist hope – is all too often based on the fallacious notion that the state is somehow 'outside' of capital and its regimes of valorisation. The antinomy or oscillation that characterises our pandemic conjuncture – desire for the state and hatred of government, monopolisation and abandonment, etc. – is written into the very structure of capitalist society.

10 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 57.

11 De Carolis, 2020.

12 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 148-57.

As Jappe et al. write, glossing Kurz's analysis of the 'complementary hostility' of state and market-production:

In reality, there exists a polar relation between the economic sphere and a state-political sphere which is its functional subsystem. Capitalism is not only the market, it is the state *and* the market-production (as well as other derived spheres). ... States are far more immersed in the world of capital than is suggested by the fetishist vision of the state as a mere instrument. ... On the one hand the state is in no way an action of society on itself which is auto-determined and self-grounded, because its conditions of existence and its social capacities totally depend on the drainage it operates in the form of taxes on the economic sphere. ... On the other hand, states in their historical genesis and the logic of their functioning constitute themselves in the role of 'ideal collective capitalist'. ... In other words, states take charge of the overall conditions of reproduction of capitalist societies that the competitive logic of the corporate economy cannot, by its very logic, assume.¹³

It is on this basis that our pandemic antinomy is viewed not as the state recouping space lost to the market but as an affair immanent to a structural contradiction, or better an internal polarity, of a capitalist society.

Rather than an embedding of economy in society by the state – to borrow a Polanyian lingo – what we are witnessing is the 'state-political self-seizure [*auto-saisie*] of capitalist society for the sake of surviving itself'.¹⁴ What *is* unique about this crisis is that, rather than endogenously emerging from the primary and determining domain of market-production, we are confronted with a planetary economic crisis that is state-political in nature. In this crisis context, both to shore up their own residual biopolitical legitimacy and to assure, after the painful parenthesis, the resumption of accumulation, states have been forced to plunge the valorisation process into an artificial coma – often converging, albeit in a contradictory manner, with a certain resurgent neo-populist discourse of productivist national sovereignty (including with surreal slogans, such as Macron's 'nationalisation of salaries').¹⁵

But the uniqueness of this crisis is also determined, in this account, by the way in which it has inherited the baleful legacy of the financial and credit crises that followed in tight sequence from the 1990s onwards. For Jappe and his co-authors, we are in the midst of another wave of massive

13 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 70-1.

14 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 74.

15 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 107.

planetary indebtedness, one marked – as a kind of bequest from the 2008 crisis – by the state and central banks' overwhelming role in shoring up the production of fictive capital which is complementing the secular decline in capital's productivity. *De Virus Illustribus* thus rests much of its critical analysis of the surge in the 'primacy of politics' through the pandemic on its diagnosis of the increasingly pathological role (from the standpoint of capital's reproducibility and its crisis-proneness) of the state in the process of valorisation. If neoliberalism, broadly construed, depended on a substitution of the financial sector as an economic engine in view of chronic sluggishness in the domain of commodity-production, what we are witnessing is states being obliged to substitute the financial sector itself. After 2008, and exponentially so in the context of the novel coronavirus:

States and the central banks of the heartlands of capitalism have come to lose their function of simple support to the private sector in the framework of the multiplication of fictive capital, to ultimately assume a function of substitution vis-à-vis the financial industry, with the aim of renewing the mountains of expired property titles and to assuage the internal constraints to the expansion of fictive capital upon which rests the ensemble of the contemporary regime of accumulation.¹⁶

With the US Fed, for instance, buying up at a discount vast quantities of corporate debt, we thus move 'from the partial statification [*étatisation*] of an already consumed capitalist future, to a socialisation of the great process of crisis'.¹⁷ Accordingly, we are increasingly confronted with a 'mega-state bubble' which is ultimately based on the idea that the state can virtually draw on the promise of future economic growth. Jappe et al. cite a phrase from French Nobel prize in economics winner Esther Duflo, who speaks of state spending during the pandemic crisis in terms of billions that are 'coming from the future'¹⁸ – a striking instance of that time-fetishism which has become second nature to capitalist thought and practice. They observe that what is being consumed here is really a future without a tomorrow, in light of the internal and external (ecological) limits to capital.

While I cannot and do not intend to do justice to the crisis theory that frames this analysis of the contemporary 'primacy of politics' and its antinomies, I think that, even in its rough outline, it provides a significant contribution to the halting debate on the place of the state

16 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 106.

17 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 107.

18 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 30.

in the pandemic. Above all, it allows us to link ideological contentions and passionate attachments regarding the feared and/or desired 'return of the state' to the systemic dynamics that have turned the state into capitalism's *hope of last resort*.¹⁹ But what are we to make of the fact that it might also be anti-capitalism's hope of last resort?

De Virus Illustribus, possibly because of its attention to dissociation and social reproduction, is not unaware of the material bases of our desire for the state (or indeed for capital); the fact that the economy is not just a matter of profit but a condition of our own biological reproduction, now for the most part radically dependent on value-circuits. The authors tellingly speak of 'the ambiguous feeling of seeing the prison in which you're trapped light on fire, without knowing whether the doors will open'.²⁰ But, as in much of value-theory and value-critique, the dismantling of the political fetishes immanent to capital's reproduction, leaves questions of strategy, broadly understood, struck down by a kind of image ban – with only the almost evanescent horizon of the abolition of capital's 'automatic subject' in their place. If value can't be abolished by halves, as many value-critics contend, one often suspects it might not be abolished at all.

It is an interesting exercise in Marxist parallax reading, thus, to confront *De Virus Illustribus* with Andreas Malm's plea for the state as humanity and ecology's 'hope of last resort' in his formidable *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century*. Malm's book is the best synthesis we have of the link between the ongoing climate catastrophe, the rolling Covid pandemic, and their capitalist aetiology – not to mention a lacerating complement to his critique of 'hybridism' and of Marxism's own blindspots about nature in his previous *The Progress of this Storm*. I am not going to elaborate here on the connections between the Covid pandemic and the Capitalocene, or on Malm's astute observations about the dissimilarities and asynchronies between climate change and the coronavirus pandemic as social and natural phenomena. Nor indeed is the eco-Leninist provocation of 'war communism' as the name of our emergency politics my concern.²¹

Rather, I wish merely to touch on Malm's anti-anarchist (and anti-value-critical as well as anti-communising) contention that it is to the *capitalist* state that one must turn to confront our chronic emergency. Is this, as the critique of value perspective would intimate, just another instantiation of instrumentalism as another variant of fetishistic thinking? My inclination would be to answer in the negative; or rather, to see in Malm's ecological refunctioning of Leninism, what we could

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19 Jappe et al., 2020, pp. 105, 113.

20 Jappe et al., 2020, p. 197.

21 Though see the perspicuous observations in Dale, 2020.

term a *tragic instrumentalism*. It is tragic, to my mind, like any serious thinking of transition, all the more so in view of the baleful temporality of climate catastrophe. And its tragedy is a function of its realism about the inescapability of coercion in political affairs. In Malm's own words:

Nothing from the past decades of stalled transitions indicates that ExxonMobil would like to metamorphose into a cleaner and storekeeper of unsalable carbon, or that meat and palm oil companies would gladly let their pastures and plantations be rewilded. It appears tautologically true that an actual transition would require some coercive authority. If anarchists would ever wield influence in such a process, they would quickly discover this circumstance and, just like anybody else, have to avail themselves of the state.²²

But the temporal determinants of our warming world, the way in which, to quote Malm's previous book, '*We can never be in the heat of the moment, only in the heat of [the] ongoing past*' of fossil capital, mean that classic Leninism, like anarchism, must be foregone – a revolutionary state, a commune-state or non-state-state is not a relevant watchword today. To the question, what state then for an ecological Leninism, Malm answers with this reflection:

We have just argued that the capitalist state is constitutionally incapable of taking these steps. And yet there is no other form of state on offer. No workers' state based on soviets will be miraculously born in the night. No dual power of the democratic organs of the proletariat seems likely to materialise anytime soon, if ever. Waiting for it would be both delusional and criminal, and so all we have to work with is the dreary bourgeois state, tethered to the circuits of capital as always. There would have to be popular pressure brought to bear on it, shifting the balance of forces condensed in it, forcing apparatuses to cut the tethers and begin to move, using [a] plurality of methods ... But this would clearly be a departure from the classical programme of demolishing the state and building another – one of several elements of Leninism that seem ripe (or overripe) for their own obituaries.²³

I'm largely sympathetic to the Marxian vein of tragic realism that Malm has infused with ecological urgency. It is also evident in his contention that, as the Bolshevik experience itself suggests, there is never any

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22 Malm, 2020, p. 151.

23 Malm, 2020, pp. 151-2.

‘clean break’ with the *ancien régime*, as well as in his recognition of the potential boomerangs of emergency politics, however emancipatory in intent – his proposal that we ‘*stay with the dilemma*’, to adapt a phrase from Donna Haraway: the dilemma of how to execute control measures in an emergency without trampling on democratic rights, but rather by securing, building on and drawing force from them’.²⁴ Yet in light of Jappe et al. diagnosis of the complementary hostility of state and capital, we may still ask how realist the realism about the *capitalist* state as the hope of last resort might be.

While the horizon of capital’s current state-induced artificial coma is indeed the patient’s recovery (with all the practical contradictions about forms of mitigation or indeed recurrent fantasies of herd immunity), a capitalist state forced by mass pressure to transition out of fossil capital with the requisite amount of haste would arguably soon see itself as being forced to transition out of capital altogether. Inasmuch as the political economy of the state is such that it relies on capital’s future vitality for its own revenues and resources, indeed for its own *power*, any (perceived) threat to that future is more than likely immediately to turn into that state’s rapidly falling material power and consequently plummeting legitimacy.

Malm is entirely correct that at the level of everyday life or indeed use-values, a radical transition out of fossil capital is far less drastic than the privations that billions of people have largely complied with for months now. But these latter measures can be translated, in a futural calculus, into value-terms (economic artificial coma versus economic agony). Given the inextricability of fossil capital from our regime of accumulation, and of the state from the latter, how long would a capitalist state remain capitalist in such a transition (and, strictly following the value-critical logic, remain a state)? I am persuaded by Malm’s contention that ‘*during the transitional period* there is no escaping outlawing wildlife consumption and terminating mass aviation and phasing out meat and other things considered parts of the good life, and those elements of the climate movement and the left that pretend that none of this needs to happen, that there will be no sacrifices or discomforts for ordinary people, are not being honest’.²⁵ But wouldn’t the clear and present threat to productive and fictive capital alike, the evident curtailing of future value – especially in the context of the mega state-bubble growing apace – quickly force the transition out of fossil capital altogether? Perhaps this is another dilemma that thinking ourselves through and out of our emergencies will force us to stay with.

24 Malm, 2020, p. 165.

25 Malm, 2020, pp. 163–4.

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Contribution to the Critique of Political Organization: Outline of An Ongoing Research Project

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Abstract: Rather than seeking to interpret the political dimension of the current health, economic and political crisis we are going through, the present contribution goes in a different direction: we would like to present what we have been able to accomplish this year, while so much else has spiralled beyond our control or understanding. The research project described here does rely on several lines of investigation that pre-date the global pandemic — stretching back to 2012, in fact — but its formulation into a more or less coherent theoretical proposition is a direct product of the new conditions of study and work that were imposed on many of us by our current predicament. We leave to the reader the work of assessing if the present conjuncture has influenced the content or the ambitions of this research.

Keywords: Political economy, political organization, Marx, Badiou, Karatani, Tononi

Preliminary note

Freud begins *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*¹ with an enigma: why is it that the soldiers who had been injured in the war were able to work through their traumatic experiences better than those who returned unscathed – who tended to have repeated dreams, reliving the violent imagery and fantasies associated with the battlefield? A similar phenomena can be seen in certain political protests — for example, the famous “June Journey” protests in Brazil in 2013: some of the militants who were at the frontline of the protests and who got injured and beaten by the police experienced, despite the pain and the anger, a sort of subjective relief of having made *injustice visible*, by being “marked” by the situation – as if the bruises “scaled down” the invisible political forces shaping that moment to a manageable individual measure, giving some limits to the phantasmatic power of the State. It was as if the cuts and bruises gave some contours to the social and political situation. Yet another similar case is reported by the psychoanalyst Rosaura Oldani Felix:² in the 1990's, in Brazil, young teenagers engaged in a game called “Russian Roulette”, where people purposefully shared needles — amongst them, some HIV-contaminated ones — claiming that “everyone is born with a passport (i.e. everyone will die) but I want mine stamped”. It was as if the invisible spread of the HIV crisis was so nerve-wracking, the impossibility of rendering ourselves commensurate with the scale of the problem so anguishing, that having one's passport “stamped” did not seem, to some, like too high a price to pay for giving the situation some symbolic contours: it would at least give a measure to the power of the virus and deliver us to a situation in which, already having contracted it, we could then see what sort of freedom we would still have.

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¹ Freud 1959

² Felix 1987

Today, the incommensurability between the scale of the pandemic and that of our lives and actions seems to haunt us as well. And the situation is all the more terrifying in that the very measure we must take to avoid making it objectively worst — isolating at home and avoiding contact with others — creates a condition where our subjective experience lacks any concrete markings of its very cause: by avoiding all contact and remaining in a safe space, we end up deprived from signals and objective constraints that could give the pandemic some contours and limits. This is why psychoanalysts report that people who already worked from home are the ones who are the most anxious, and most exposed to the worst fantasies of impotence in these times, since not even a change in their habits is delimiting the singularity of this situation in their daily lives.

This scalar problem is very particular to social and natural catastrophes - a sort of impediment to the process of mourning and grief: it is hard to work through and ultimately accept predicaments whose inherently global and un-situated nature leave very few singular traces at the level of our local experience. Rather than working through the loss and transformation of our life-styles and ideals, we get trapped either in anxious paranoia (pure sense of globality) or resort to ineffective symbolizations through acting outs that expose us to unnecessary risks (pure locality). The fact that medical doctors who are in the frontline of the pandemic, militants creating mutual aid systems in peripheral communities to allow others to stay home, as well as essential workers and poor people who lack the financial means to remain in isolation, are less likely to experience this intrusion of the Other — the realization, the coronavirus has forced on many of us, that we live in one same world — as an anguishing one, or to give in to crazy paranoias. In short, there seems to be some “collateral” subjective benefit to certain forms of political work today, those which render us more commensurate with the social causes of our personal effects, not only providing us with the means to change the situation, but also to give the proper form to the things we have lost.

This is why, rather than hastily seeking to interpret the political dimension of the current health, economic and political crisis we are going through, the present contribution goes in a different direction: we would like to present what we have been able to accomplish this year, while so much else has spiraled beyond our control or understanding. The research project described here does rely on several lines of investigation that pre-date the global pandemic — stretching back to 2012, in fact — but its formulation into a more or less coherent theoretical proposition is a direct product of the new conditions of study and work that were imposed on many of us by our current predicament. We leave to the reader the work of assessing if the present conjuncture has influenced the content or the ambitions of this research.

General overview

The strategic objectives of this research project can be defined by two interconnected imperatives.

First of all, our goal is to construct a theoretical approach capable of maintaining that *politics is its own form of thinking* — irreducible to science, ethics or aesthetics — without thereby losing any claims to its capacity to produce rigorous knowledge of social reality.

This objective requires us to avoid both the trope of Marxism as a “science of history” as well as the opposite one, which reduces politics to an autonomous field defined by immediate political action, struggle and decision-making. To avoid the first position, we must be able to demonstrate that politics has its own criteria of rigor and consistency, which cannot be reduced to its similarities to science, even when scientific results are mobilized as relevant political resources. To avoid the second, this internal consistency must be shown to also include the means for production of social knowledge and social technologies. These two negative orientations are brought together in a more constructive way in our attempt to recast the binomial “political economy”, which preserves the difference between a field of political agency and another of materially-based social laws and tendencies, and to propose a further integration between the active and the descriptive dimensions of politics — between political organization and political economy — in such a way that local organizations can be conceived as small economic models and national and world economies as particular forms of large social organizations.

Our second goal is to substitute the strategy of theoretical “critique” for an *axiomatic* strategy.

Against what remains the main theoretical strategy of the Left — that is, proposing better descriptions of our current social reality in such a way that our theory is capable of locating and expressing the inconsistencies and weaknesses of our social system in ways that conservative depictions cannot — we want our theoretical space to be infinitely richer than our social world, so that capitalist social formations might appear within it as *particular* solutions within the broader space of other possible solutions to general problems of social coordination, allocation of resources and free association. The strategy of regionalizing or situating the parameters of our social formation has profound effects both to theoretical construction as well as to the practice of politics, since the first sign of a broader theoretic framework is its capacity to reformulate problems in its own terms, meaning that, within this framework, *communism becomes the theory of how to solve communist problems, and not capitalist ones*.

Together, these two objectives suggest an overall approach to political thinking which combines a theory of social organization within which both capitalist and non-capitalist forms of organization are expressible and comparable while, on the other, we further reinforce our reliance on actual political practice as the primary experimental means

to probe into the validity of new egalitarian hypotheses and structures — endowing political work with its own “epistemological” value, so to speak, while also connecting politics and social models in a more integrated way.

The Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology

The main motivation behind this research is, however, not a theoretical or exegetical one — we are not interested in providing yet another interpretation of the Marxian corpus or a better proof that it is scientifically sound. Our starting point is, instead, the accumulated political experience of the *Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology* (CSII)³.

Though the project has undergone several transformations throughout the last ten years, its basic purpose remains functioning as a laboratory of organizational practices. Rather than focusing on the engagement with a particular political issue or movement, CSII established itself as a space where activists from a diverse set of social backgrounds and political commitments could come together to investigate their common obstacles and develop tools that could be useful in their different sites of struggle. The basic premise of the project is that even if, from an ideological point of view, the Left is composed of a highly diverse — and sometimes conflicting — tapestry of organizations and ideals, a great number of common struggles and problems become clear when we approach the political landscape from the standpoint of its concrete organizational challenges.

In order to explore these practical impasses, we have developed a methodology that has theoretical, therapeutic and experimental components. First, the collective is divided into groups based on geographical differences — we have had groups in more than 7 cities in Brazil and elsewhere, not counting members who only joined our meetings virtually. In these groups, we share both our experiences as activists in different political fronts — trade unions, political parties, social movements, etc — and theoretical tools that some of us consider helpful in understanding these diverse political contexts.

But the crucial aspect of CSII is that, based on the conflicts and impasses that emerge in these groups, members are invited to construct "subgroups" inside the collective — associations with other members with the most diverse goals in view: creating journals, study groups, communitarian aid projects or new party cells, for example. The organization of these subgroups is then used as an experimental ground where we can test different hypotheses on how to deal with the emergent impasses and insights developed in our collective meetings — and the ideas which gain practical confirmation in their subgroups are

3 Information about CSII can be found at www.ideiaeideologia.com (in portuguese) and <https://csiimontreal.wordpress.com/> (in english). A good overview of the Circle's organizational structure can be found in this recent presentation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PMZuPwNOtE>

then properly formalized and offered in projects and partnerships with other collectives and institutions. In this way, we are able to reframe the organizational problems which, within regular political practice, might not emerge as common impasses that effectively cut across the ideological and tactical spectrum of the Left or that might remain hidden under a myriad of external social forces constraining political action.

Throughout the last decade, over 300 activists and militants have participated in our project, bringing together their combined experiences within 6 political parties, several trade unions in Rio and São Paulo, social movements, as well as their heterogeneous social backgrounds. It is this underlying commitment to operate on a diverse sample of militant experiences that makes the emergence of invariances — both in our personal testimonies as well as in the projects developed by "subgroups" — relevant signals of the structure and challenges shaping the landscape of political struggle today.

However, the Circle has not as of yet produced an explicit and general theory of its own practical commitments — a conceptual framework where collective organization is thought as an experimental site which teaches us about the world in the same measure that it affects and transforms it. It is the hypothesis that political organization is intrinsically connected to the development of political thinking — in fact providing a support for it that is irreducible to the ideals of the people engaged with it — that truly motivates this research project and its two main theoretical objectives.

Previous results: 2016-2018

Though CSII exists for over ten years now, the current research project can be said to have begun in 2016, with the publication of two texts: *Freeing Thought from Thinkers: a Case Study*⁴ and *Phenomenology of Value: Badiou and Marx*.⁵ Let us briefly summarize the outcome of these two initial attempts to engage with this new theoretical approach.

*Freeing Thought from Thinkers*⁶

This first essay sought to give a first theoretical account of the work done by the Circle. In it, we argued for the philosophical relevance of conceptualizing political thinking in such a way that we might rigorously distinguish between the thinking that takes place at the level of collective organization from the individual thought of its participants:

“Our wager can be formulated as follows: there are ideas which can only be consistently thought of within certain forms of collective

4Tupinambá 2016

5Yao 2016

6 Available at: https://www.academia.edu/24772227/Freeing_Thought_From_Thinkers_A_Case_Study

organization. That is, there are ideas which can only be properly developed if their conceptual construction is tied together with the practical construction of a given institutional space.”⁷

Mobilizing different philosophical approaches — most notably, the works of Agamben, Rancière, Žižek, Sohn-Rethel and Badiou — we tried to demonstrate that the hypothesis of different forms of thought that are commensurable with different forms of social consistency can in fact be found in Marx’s own account of the value-form, though it remains mostly constrained there to his theory of commodity fetishism. However, the argument that Marx’s theory of the commodity-form is a *special* case of a general theory of how different social forms can consistently think ideas that we, as individuals, are incapable of directly grasping or conceiving — while other organizational forms might be able to provide alternative epistemological mediations — already brought together the two basic objectives of our overall project. On the one hand, we sought to present the capitalist social form as one amongst different forms of such access to organizational thinking. On the other, we already pointed to the role that concrete experimentation with the rules and designs of collective organizations can have in helping us learn about the social space we are embedded in.

Furthermore, this line of argument — albeit extremely abstract and philosophical — gave particular importance to the displacement, operated by the value form, of immediate forms of *measure* and *evaluation* of social reality to the mediating role of commodities themselves, especially the money-commodity. That is, it was already at stake, in this early stage of the research, that a general theory of collective organization would also have to consider social organization as a means to measure aspects of social reality which are directly inaccessible to us — a point which would later bring us into a debate with Friedrich Hayek and his theory of the price-system as a solution to the social coordination problem.

Still, *Freeing Thought From Thinkers* emphasized almost exclusively the political and organizational stakes of the research, doing little to rethink the intrinsic role that science already plays in the Marxist critique of political economy or to suggest how such an alternative understanding of collective organization might transform political theory and strategy.

*Phenomenology of Value*⁸

Part of this theoretical lacuna was addressed by the second foundational text, *Phenomenology of Value: Badiou and Marx* (Yao, 2016), which assumed a more analytic perspective — leaving matters of political

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7Tupinambá 2016

8 Available at: <http://crisiscritique.org/political11/Yuan%20Yao.pdf>

organization and experimentation aside — and focused on arguing for the benefits of recasting Marx’s theory of value and fetishism in terms of Alain Badiou’s “objective phenomenology”, presented in *Logics of Worlds*.⁹ Once more, the theory of value is taken as a privileged point of intervention, but this time there was an attempt at implementing the strategy of recomposing the critique of political economy in a more axiomatic framework — that is, of seeking to situate the logic of value as a particular case of a broader formalism:

“The following work argues that Marx’s version of the law of value can and should be formulated in the language of Badiou’s phenomenology. Most expositions about the law of value usually focus on its explanatory force or its empirical undecidability. This is because, as a foundational question in Marxist political economy which continually attempts to establish itself as scientific, its value seems to reside in validating (or invalidating) Marxist political thought as such. This text takes a different approach: rather than attempt to prove or disprove the law of value, we ask what sort of questions can be possible on its basis.

In other words, what does a world where this law is operative look like? It is important then to qualify in what sense value (as delineated by Marx) can exist within a world, which is where Badiou enters. We show how his philosophy can be utilized as a tool for extracting the important features of our question and transforming them into new vantage point on the theory of value. Specifically, we wish to show that the phenomenology of Badiou is a framework suited for studying value because value is phenomenal in the strict sense.”

Alain Badiou’s work had already been paramount in *Freeing Thought from Thinkers*, where his theory of thinking as a special sort of formal invariance that emerges within different material supports served as the philosophical backbone of our defense of the epistemological dimension of collective organization.¹⁰ In *Phenomenology of Value*, however, a different aspect of his work started coming into play, namely, the fact that an important part of his philosophical project has been the development of a general theory of “worlds”, that is, a theory of how different logical spaces, constrained by a minimal set of axioms, already display properties that we associate with appearance and phenomenological consistency — even though these spaces are not formed by our perception or conceptualization, and might very well be incommensurate with our individual existences.

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9 Badiou 2006

10Tupinambá 2016, p.171

In short, Badiou offers a rigorous framework within which to discuss what it means for something to *objectively appear in a world* as well as what is formally at stake in constructing maps which, preserving certain structures of a world, can therefore extract and organize information about it. Reformulating Marx's theory of value with the tools provided by Badiou — in particular, the theory of localic topoi — would therefore allow us to specify the *particular* type of constraints involved in the value-form within a richer formalism which is also capable of expressing other similar forms of consistency and measure for complex social worlds. Furthermore, insofar as Badiou's theory is also concerned with providing the means to think about different practices as forms of inventive thinking — politics included — to recast the critique of political economy within its bases is to also make political economy commensurate with other forms of political organization.

In *Phenomenology of Value*, however, the main focus was on showing the basic compatibility between Marx's project and Badiou's objective phenomenology — and this was accomplished by showing convincing correlations between the logic of value and Badiou's theory of atomic logic from *Logics of Worlds* — culminating on the suggestion that the perspective of labour, in capitalism, offers a singular standpoint from which *more information* about the social world is visible than from the standpoint of the mediation of commodities and commodity exchange. These correlations, however, did not lead yet to transformation in any concepts or ideas — nor did they concern the social world today, restricting themselves, in this first proposal, to establishing the validity of the connection between the critique of political economy and the categorial framework of Badiou's project.

*The Mismeasure of Thought*¹¹

Two years later, in 2018, another publication — *The Mismeasure of Thought: Some Notes on Organization, Scale and Experimentation in Politics and Science*¹² — tried to continue the original insights from *Freeing Thought From Thinkers*. Unlike the previous installment, however, this new proposal sought to bridge the gap between the theory of collective organization as a consistent means to think different aspects of the social and the parallel developments of the project in *Phenomenology of Value*, where the focus was mostly on the possibility of embedding Marx's critique of political economy in the framework of Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*.

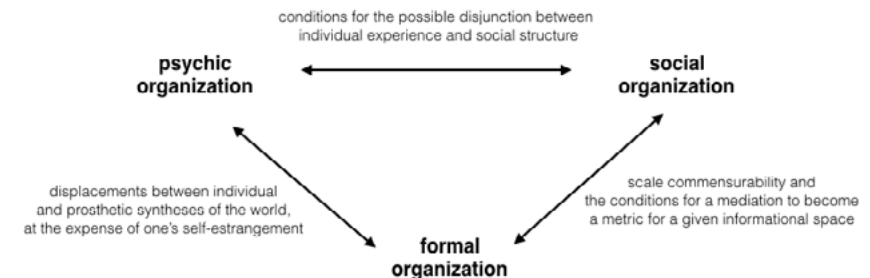
Here, the strategy for approximating the two strains of our research was to take up Fredric Jameson's theory of *cognitive mappings* — of the different ways the totality of our social space can be made commensurate

¹¹ Available at: https://www.academia.edu/36174215/The_Mismeasure_of_Thought_Some_Notes_on_Organization_Scale_and_Experimentation_in_Politics_and_Science

¹² Tupinambá 2018

with our figurative powers and given contours through different aesthetic objects — and demonstrate that Jameson's theory is actually much more consistently applied to the thinking of collective organizations and social forms themselves as local models of global organizational structures. This shift in perspective — benefiting from Jameson's idea, but removing it from the field of aesthetics — allowed us to propose a much more intrinsic approach to the connection between political economy and political organization and to reframe our previous philosophical enquiry into the forms of social thinking in more concrete political terms: under which conditions can a particular social form allow individuals to access and produce information about the social totality that they could not directly think?

In order to further develop this question, we reformulated Jameson's theory in a more general form by first distinguishing three different but interconnected components in the operation of cognitive mapping — the organization of psychic spaces, the organization of social spaces and organization of formal mediations — and three different types of relations: (1) between individuals and society, relations that have historically tensioned the commensurability between our experience and social structure, (2) between society and mediations, relations between technological advancement leading to more complex social forms and the technical and organizational means that are capable of extracting consistent information about society, and (3) between individuals and mediations, relations of engagement and estrangement without which individuals cannot shift their perspective to that of the mediating device or apparatus, thus acquiring the means to see society in a more intelligible way.



Recasting Jameson's theory in this way, we equipped ourselves with the means to think Marx's theory of value as a theory of a particular form of social organization — one where money functions not only as a means of circulation, measure of value, world-money and hoarding object, but also as a cognitive mediation for individuals to access information that is not made in their own measure. This last property, we argued, was the one Hayek focused on in his theory of prices.

Finally, in line with *Phenomenology of Value*, we suggested that this general theory of cognitive mappings could find an explicit formalization within Badiou's framework:

"Even though Jameson helped us to introduce the epistemological value of cognitive mappings, it was by moving back from aesthetics to political economy, with Hayek and Marx, that we were able to address the ontology of such a practice, dissecting its basic components not in terms of types of practice - aesthetical, political, and so on - but of organizational spaces and finding in the questions of scale and complexity a homogeneous measure to deal with the constraints of multiple mappings between them. But, as we stated in our introductory remarks, our main concern is not with the development of critical theory, but rather with renewing the approach to collective organization, proposing that we recognize the capacity of certain social institutions to introduce us into dimensions of the political space which are inaccessible from our own direct cognitive stance. And this constructive or propositive view cannot be found either in Hayek nor in Marx, even though it is clearly palpable in Jameson's formulation of the challenge. It is perhaps only in Alain Badiou's thinking that we can find the appropriate tools to bring together Jameson's propositive view while simultaneously exiting the domain of aesthetics as an ideological or superstructural realm. In fact, the three terms we have been trying to implicitly track in this study all have explicit correlates in Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*, a book which remains mostly unexplored in terms of its implications for political practice. There are striking similarities between Badiou's theory of the subjectivized body and our approach to the question of "organization", between his objective phenomenology and the way we want to consider the question of "scale" and the theory of organs and decision points and the question of "experimentation" - even though the proper assessment of these ideas will have to wait another opportunity"

It is important to state that, more than applying Jameson's theory as means to further develop the connection between Marx and Badiou, *The Mismeasure of Thought* operated a profound conceptual shift in our approach to the project, one that placed the problem of social scales at the center of political concern. This, in fact, is the motivation behind the use of cognitive mappings: since Badiou's theory of thinking is formally treated as a theory of *immanent models* where parts of a world can model aspects of that world itself - becoming capable of expressing new properties of it through the expansion of that world's logical space - finding a way to think the problem of political thinking in terms of the relation between local and global, "small" and "large" parts, between different degrees of complexity, etc, implies also finding the

means to think collective organizations as possible models of social organization as a whole. The shift to a "scaling" approach to the problem of politics was a crucial step in bringing together political action and political economy under a single theory of political thinking as the space of possible modeling strategies.

Still, the text did not do more than suggest certain concepts that could orient us in this new perspective - ideas like "impersonal emancipation", the problem of "autonomization" of social forms or the idea of collective organization as an "experimental" apparatus. The issue of how this approach would transform the Marxian critique of political economy, or how these political "mappings" of society would be formalized in Badiou's theory remained untouched.

*From Cognitive Mappings as Sheaves*¹³

In that same year, we published another text, *From Cognitive Mappings to Sheaves*,¹⁴ which also attempted to bridge the gap between the original two essays, but now starting from the previous work done in *Phenomenology of Value*. In that earlier text, we explored the connection between Marx's theory of value and Badiou's theory of worlds in terms of conceptual correspondences, but the increased expressive power attained by recasting Marx in Badiou's broader framework was not yet explored. Here, however, we begin from the mathematical theories of localic toposes and sheaves, employed by Badiou, in order to construct a new approach to the price structure and the global coherence of markets.

By far the most ambitious of our four contributions, *From Cognitive Mappings to Sheaves* begins by recasting the problem of social determination within the scalar paradigm of *The Mismeasure of Thought*, depicting social theories or perspectives in terms of how the choice of different scales of analysis organize the differential structure of data spaces. This allowed us to address the price-structure as a specific strategy for selecting "points" in social space such that these points might preserve and combine information about the underlying structure. And since Badiou's use of category theory as formal means to think about worlds and objective phenomenology makes ample use of the duality between topology and logic, between the 'shape' of topological spaces and their corresponding logical consistency, the reframing of the theory of cognitive mappings in terms of the passage between local and global properties of spaces - a process called "sheafification" - showed itself to be a promising route of investigation into the ways prices might allow for more or less consistent "gluing" of exchanges in such a way as to preserve the global consistency of markets.

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13 Available at: <http://crisiscritique.org/2018h/yao.pdf>

14 Yao 2018

The text concludes with a different view on the shortcomings of market capitalism — one that, in line with our axiomatic strategy, is not so much concerned with expressing the immorality of capitalism's political premises, so much as the *poverty* of its particular solution to fundamental social problems:

“If we assume that the space of value is well-understood (where, for example, one can distinguish independent random variables), we can join Hayek in celebrating the miracle of price system. However, if this space is non-trivial, then we cannot trust that a sheaf of prices exists. This seems to be the case when we consider the role of credit in sustaining the system and the culpability of complex financial instruments in recent crises. Instead of thinking of the market as always in the process of converging to equilibrium, we should think of it as attempting to stave off crisis by producing its own formal means of consistency. By identifying the market as a continual process of sheafification, we may be able to computationally map this process and therefore find critical points of intervention. To do this, we have to shed our assumptions about convergence of prices and instead incorporate data generated by global crises.

What Hayek's approach misses is how the price system restructures the very knowledge that sustains it. This restructuring is generally taken as a form of progress - as technology improves, workers are freed to specialize, which gives rise to the “knowledge-class”. This in turn leads to increased productivity as business firms transform under a confluence of different fields. However, knowledge is a form which inherently resists commodification. Attempts to create boundaries around it in order to make it rentable are transient, as it has (near-)zero reproduction cost. Businesses quickly adopt the latest technologies and automation techniques, and the outcome is that less workers are needed. The correlate to the knowledge class is therefore the transiently or permanently unemployed class. In assigning prices to the space of value, human society achieves dynamic growth and coordination, but this process then transforms value itself. Along these lines, what if the value space has topological properties which prevent a consistent global assignment of prices? This is not simply asserting that conditions are never ideal due to external factors. It is asserting rather that the sheafifying process inherently fails because of factors which are not visible in local assignments (which may appear efficient after all). These topological factors only appear as singularities, or points where the sheaf of prices break down.”

Scale and the pandemic: a local intervention

Beside the theoretical attempts outlined above of a general framework within to understand the problems of pricing, scale, and cognitive

mapping, the current health crisis provided an opportunity for a quick intervention on the debate, mobilizing a similar approach. In *Contagion and Visibility: notes on the phenomenology of a pandemic*¹⁵, the issue of the visibility of a threat that is spread along the multiple levels and scales — having potential influence over personal ethics, to government policies, to the global economy is tackled from the point of view of the relationship between this *hyper-phenomenon* and the cognitive mapping that is possible from the individual point of view:

The transition between worlds here being examined is not just a transition between two *visible* worlds, but it is also the emergence of something out of *invisibility*. An invisibility that is the result of a difference of *scale* amongst phenomena. The virus itself, as a token of this invisibility, makes itself visible through its effects only: both the disease, if one gets it, and other effects at different time-scales, spatially scattered - the effects on the herd dynamics and on the economy. The effects that were missing, although were expected, in my stroll on the streets of Rio de Janeiro four days ago, that were starting to become present two days ago.

And the text proceeds by questioning “How should one respond to an invisible menace? How should we respond to the creeping effects of its dissemination? What kinds of sheaves are to be constructed from these phenomena to our sensibility?”. In a way, this intervention was an attempt to insert the problem of the *subjective* phenomenology within the *objective phenomenological* camp of the formalisms being mobilized in the extant installments of the series that is being reviewed here. This subjective phenomenology makes use of the difference between *seeing*, a simple sensible affectation and *seeing-as*, which places the sensible contents within a broader conceptual framework that enables to see it as *something else*. So the question “how to see the pandemic as a pandemic” makes sense within this framework, once it is evident that the pandemic as such lacks an objectual character that enables being directly detected.

[The] mobilization of pure globality and pure locality expresses well the predicament of a phenomenology of the pandemic - that between the necessity of believing the reality of that which is invisible - that is, maintaining a minimal “thickness” to the hypothesis of the existence of the virus, without succumbing either to anxious paranoia, or to its reverse - projective denegation of its existence. The predicament is not exclusive to the present pandemic, but is ubiquitous in the experience of contemporary global capitalism, wherein processes with causal efficacy supersede our capacity of making sense. In a sense, we are

15 Available at: <https://identitiesjournal.edu.mk/index.php/IJPGC/announcement/view/15?fbclid=IwAR0eJDuu5XSA4vikZ7DP-g7CNkgNZ0-RiSnvuk6CNglzG51vu9V7ycEWrY>

not inhabiting different worlds in the sense of Goodman here, diachronically switching between the worlds of art, scientific theories and philosophemes, but we are inhabiting a split between an *intrusion* to our abilities of worldmaking and the worlds we fashion to try and make sense of it. The phenomenon/noumenon split is *immanentized* within the situation.

This illustrates the purchase of the problematic pursued here also to specific topics such as the current health crisis, and by doing so, also demonstrates the urgency of conceptual and formal frameworks that are not only multiscalar but explicitly tackles the relations and mappings between scales in order to advance an extended causal picture, wherein Capital itself is seen as an efficient cause even if the proper level of its action greatly supersedes any immediate capability of individuals.

General comments on preliminary results

The first two cycles of our research, summarized in these four contributions, plus the local intervention in the health crisis already form a suggestive picture and set out an orientation for our next steps. We believe that one of the provisory outcomes of our investigation has been to give some substance to the hypothesis that it is possible to defend the sort of perspective shift in political thinking which we mentioned as a general strategic aim. A shift that allows for a much more integrated articulation between political organization and political economy, and which we might now decompose into several connected theoretical movements:

Firstly, it motivates us to look for a formulation of both political practice and economical systems where the distinction between collective organization and social coordination problems becomes a matter of restrictions within our theory, rather than two separate domains without any conceptual means of articulation. Our strategy here was to recognize that both political action, political economy and coordination mechanism deal with *forms of organization*.

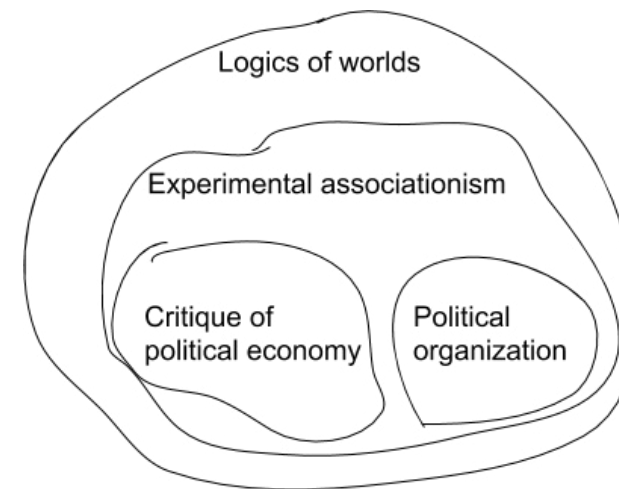
The insight that a theory of organization provides us with the appropriate perspective to render politics and economics commensurable has a long (and silent) history in Marxism: it dates back to Alexander Bogdanov and his "tektology", or science of organization, which sought to provide a general framework for thinking about nature, society and knowledge in terms of organized systems and their relations. In a way, we also start from his original axiom, presented in *Essays in Tektology*, namely, that the concept of "production" is a special case of the concept of organization.¹⁶

Secondly, adopting the "organizational point of view", as Bogdanov called it, implies accepting the task of reformulating *both* the theory

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¹⁶ Bogdanov 1980

of political action and the theory of economic systems within one homogeneous theoretical space and developing, within this framework, specific operators that allow us to pass from the general theory to specific social formations, as well as move between the global analysis of a society and the local practices of collective organization and social mediation — all the while accounting for how these different strata and domains relate to one another.

Though the aim of Alain Badiou's project far exceeds this already ambitious project, it is our belief that his *Logics of Worlds* offers the most consistent framework within which to construct our political theory. This does require us to take considerable care with the move from his general theory of worlds to a more restricted theory of social and political spaces, which must itself be "smaller" than his project, but still "bigger" than the theoretical space of Marx's critique of capitalist political economy:



However, a third conceptual movement is needed. After all, finding a conceptual perspective that allows for a homogeneous treatment of political action and political economy — through the concept of organization — and choosing an adequate framework to accommodate it — Badiou's philosophical use of the mathematical machinery of category theory — is not enough. We must be able to recompose what we already know of both integrated poles — politics and economy — within this new theoretical space. This implies finding a new conceptual language which is expressive enough to give us the necessary predicates to describe economic categories such as price, value, labour, commodity and capital while also leaving room for the definition of tactical and strategic operators at stake in militant work, such as strikes, communes, cooperation, organizational design, etc. This is what the shift towards a *scalar* description and analysis allows us to do: not only is it perfectly cogent with Badiou's own project — arguably the most consistent attempt to think phenomenology in a scale-sensitive way — but it is also intimately linked to the problem of how to connect local and global

efforts, both in economic theory as well as in political practice.

To evaluate how transformative the turn to a "scalar" language for politics can be, we should consider that the history of socialism until now can be mostly divided in terms of two paradigms or fundamental metaphors. The "utopian socialism" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries thought itself first and foremost in *spatial* terms: it provided a moral condemnation of capitalism, which it countered with a communitarian practice that should lead us "outside" of capitalist relations. Later, in the nineteenth century, "scientific socialism" departed from the realization that there is no "outside" to the ever-expanding social structure of capitalism — and it shifted its fundamental metaphor to a *temporal* one. Instead of a moral critique, based on our immediate perception of the market and its effects, this new program offered us a "scientific" view of capitalist social relations — which makes sense, since it was no longer a matter of describing specific relations in a given place, but the structure of an underlying logic or system that was itself inaccessible to us individually. Not only was this new analysis of capitalism based on the way labour time is measured and stolen in the process of valorization, but this temporal regime was also countered with by a temporal and historical rift, a revolution, which should discern a "before" and an "after" — just as utopian socialism distinguished between an "inside" and an "outside" — leading not to a new space, but to a whole new economy of time, called communism.

As previously stated, our own project, however, seeks to deploy a third fundamental metaphor: neither spatial nor temporal, our project privileges the scalar distinction between large and small, between the increasingly fragmented and incommensurate shards of social space and the different strategies that might allow us to create a common global social form. Communism, here, is neither a community "outside" of market relations, nor a future economic system that comes "after" capitalism, but a set of theoretical and practical tools for the construction of common spaces out of the multi-dimensional fragments of social reality that can be glued together in different and non-trivial ways. However, so much of our political vocabulary, political tools and means to assess victory and failure are deeply indebted to these two previous metaphors — which means that a lot of work will have to go into rethinking political practices from this new standpoint.

Finally, the recasting of political economy and political practice in terms of organizational spaces, the investigation of philosophical and formal means to positively construct a theoretical framework capable of accommodating this organizational perspective, and a recomposition of well-established results of Marxist critique and communist practice through a new political grammar — here, shaped by problems of scale — serves the ultimate objective of enriching our capacity for political action. If our research departs from the political experience of the Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology, it seeks to return to the political sphere,

where its true merits and shortcomings can truly be evaluated.

This implies that that our research project must be able to not only remain open to the interlocution with other political thinkers and militants, but also that we devise actual experiments — in the very singular sense the term acquires within this framework — that are informed by this new conceptual perspective. This aspect of the research is not as far fetched as it seems, since this investigation remains tied, in part, to CSII, where new subgroups and projects are constantly being contemplated and carried out. Still, it has become increasingly clear that, as argued in *The Mismeasure of Thought*, political experiments can only learn about aspects of social reality that are commensurate with their own complexity: some ideas and inventive hypotheses can only be put to the test through political movements that exceed the small scale of local collectives and party cells.

General problems for further research

Evidently, the four conceptual movements described above bring with them a series of new challenges and open threads in need of detailed development. Let us consider some of them.

Alain Badiou, his philosophy and its limitations

If Badiou is to offer us a general interpretative framework within which to construct our theory, it is important to understand if his own selection of certain fragments from topos theory are not imbued with philosophical and political prejudices that are incompatible with our own approach. For example, it is well known that, as an old maoist, Badiou thinks "the primacy of the political" in slightly different terms than us: rather than seek to recast political economic theory as a particular case of a general theory of political models and mappings, he tends to treat economy and its own problems as irrelevant for political action. Is this something that affects his theory of worlds or is it — against his own personal preferences — capable of helping us express an alternative approach to political work, where "organization" is not so tied to personal relations and can take up both characteristics we currently assign to capitalist social forms or still unknown forms?

This question requires not only to further investigate the formalism deployed by Badiou, but also to demonstrate that other consistent presentations of his system are possible, where his own emphasis on personal fidelity, eventual conversions and political autonomy can be downplayed without us also losing in the process all the virtues of his philosophical project¹⁷.

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17 A careful reassessment of Badiou's philosophy — with a focus on his deeply underappreciated *Logics of Worlds* — was carried out by the *Subset of Theoretical Practice*, a research group inside CSII. All meetings are available at: <https://stp.ideaandideology.com/>

Exploring the conceptual power of the formalism deployed in *Logics of Worlds* is not only an exegetical task. In fact, it sets us, at least on a first moment, in a collision course with a tradition of political thinking which has privileged other formal tools as means to work through problems of social organization, namely cybernetics and complex system theory. Besides the task of understanding category theory and what it can offer us, we must therefore also investigate if the gains from complex theory — which, as a restricted theory of local and global interactions, has found a central place in economic thinking today — can be maintained in this new framework, and if its own formal shortcomings can be recognized and overcome within our own approach.

Another crucial problem for us is that, as stated in our initial objectives, we are not looking for a scientific theory — our main motivation for this research is eminently political. This means that we are not interested in constructing a new language for political economy, one that merely describes our current world better than previous ones. Instead of looking for scientific *predictions* of economic quantities or social phenomena — the criteria of social theories looking to imitate the hard sciences — we believe that the true criteria for evaluating the validity of our theory is its capacity to pose questions that can only be answered by empirical experimentation through political practice. This implies that our formalism must also be amenable to corrections and to an interplay with an experimental apparatus that is singularly political — and not borrowed from the methods of physics, for example. However, we still lack a general theory of what it means to "experiment" — without which the idea of "political experiments" remains mostly metaphorical.

Finally, both the categorial treatment of social organization as well as our theory of political experiments cross at the point of a theory of measure and of metric spaces — that is, once given a certain space, how to construct an immanent mediation which allows us to extract information from it in a consistent way.

Marx, the critique of political and the theory of social formations

Though a lot of work has been accomplished in showing that there are important correlations between Marx's project and Badiou's system, most of our analyses have been focused on the first volume of *Capital*, which does not deal with Marx's own theory of how value is represented in capitalism — that is, his theory of "production prices", which brings into the picture the famous "transformation problem". This famous issue, which deals with the relation between value and price structures, is a privileged point of enquiry for us, as our conceptual language should allow us to reformulate this polemical point in a new way.

Furthermore, there is a long tradition of thinkers who have tried to formalize Marx's critique of political economy with different

mathematical tools — especially linear algebra and, more recently, dynamic systems analysis. This tradition is mostly concerned with the economic soundness of Marx's project and with demonstrating the consistency of the labour theory of value. However, this is not our purpose — in fact, our theory of social organization should allow for the conceptualization of social systems where value is not measured in accordance to any one single fundamental determinant — there is still a lot of work to be done in understanding the relation between this project and our own.

Another line of enquiry connected to Marxism concerns the issue of world history and of the singularity of social worlds. Even though we privilege a scalar account of social spaces, we still need conceptual resources to think through historical change and with which to distinguish singular historical formations. Here we have been invested in the work of Kojin Karatani, whose theory of social formations as the articulation of different "modes of exchange" opens up a promising route to refine our account of social worlds, while also preserving several insights from Marxism, history, anthropology and social sciences.

The study of Karatani's alternative take on historical materialism is also connected to an investigation of the limitations of our current theoretical means. For example, an important development of our research has been a reassessment of Marxism and communist politics from the standpoint of the inherent duality between the analytic resources — dedicated to the understanding of capitalism — and the political ones — the concepts we use in our political practice. Following Karatani, Slavoj Žižek has called this the "parallax" of politics and economy in Marxism: the fact that an unconceptualized shift of perspective must take place when we move from the categories that help us analyze the capitalist social formation — value-form, money, circulation, etc — to the categories that are effective in political practice — agitation, propaganda, engagement, discipline and so on.

Finally, there is a very concrete motivation that, together with the work in CSII, underlies our current research project, namely, the recognition that the historical conditions which gave Marxism's previous incarnation its validity have shifted significantly. Here, a promising hypothesis we are pursuing is that of the "peripheralization" of the social world — in short, the thesis that the fringe-conditions of social spaces in the periphery of the advanced core of capitalism are now slowly expanding towards the centre, bringing with it its hybrid spaces of law and non-law, the social fractures that divide urban spaces between incommensurate social fragments, the ubiquity of social violence and forms of exploitation which do not rely on the previous organization of the labour force — "regressive" characteristics which nonetheless make a better fit for financial speculation and new forms of crisis-based profit making. This drastic increase in social heterogeneity — accompanied by a similar increase in social complexity — presents a fatal blow to any theory which seeks to provide, in one consistent expression, the general

law of social cohesion of capitalist reality — a predicament which, for Fredric Jameson, underlies our current crisis of a communist cognitive mapping of the world.

The hypothesis of the peripheralization of the world does not only offer us a consistent account of the social transformations that led to the saturation of our previous theoretical tools, but it also gives us an account of the context that pushed us to develop a laboratory for organizational practices that seeks to rethink how collective organization might give us new and valuable insight into our social totality — the Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology. To find a theory that answers to the demands of this experimental collective is also a starting point to conceive of a theory that answers to some of the larger demands of our times.

Most recent developments

During the last few months, a larger research group has formed around this project, proposing regular meetings and discussions around specific components of this "bigger picture"¹⁸. We offer here a series of brief summaries of these complementary lines of enquiry, still under investigation.

*The transformation problem and the representation of capital*¹⁹

A particularly interesting application of our general approach to economics is the possibility of considering Marx's four different definitions of price in *Capital* as four delimited ways of organizing capitalist sociability. What does that mean? We can say that Marx uses the same "algorithm", the same three-step script in each definition of price, but he considers different aspects of capital organization each time – incommensurable aspects among themselves, such as the production of surplus through absolute surplus and relative surplus in a capital singularly considered and the appropriation of surplus through the equalization of the rates of profit of the totality of capital.

The structure that Marx presents in the initial chapter on commodities – the first definition of price – takes as its starting point what is most elementary for Political Economy: exchange value, the quantitative relation between two different commodities. Two qualitatively different things can only be related if they are expressions of a common substance. Putting aside the use value of commodities, that is, the human needs that they satisfy regardless of the way they are

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¹⁸ We dedicated two meetings to the discussion of the project as a whole. The first is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYm34ZWZ2k4&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=2 — and the second, more recent, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAasXNXZyM0&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=8

¹⁹ Meeting recording available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pu06Ny97ys&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=1&t=170s

produced, it is only the property of being products of labor that remains in common between them. Here we have the second step of the script: two commodities can only be opposed in exchange because they can be reduced to different amounts of abstract labor, or, as Marx says, productive human expenditure of brain, muscles, nerves, hands. But it is not enough to say that abstract labor creates value. For Marx, the value of a commodity is determined by the average labor time required for its production in the sector to which it is linked (the average is an element that reappears at various scales). From the immediate form, the exchange value, therefore, one passes to the common substance between two commodities, the value. The last step, the one that Political Economy did not go through, is to return to exchange value no longer as a purely causal quantitative relation, but as a form of expression of value. It is for not taking that step that Political Economy behaves as a knowledge that is external to its object, incapable of unfolding more complex determinations from the simplest ones. In note 32 of the first chapter, Marx explains that his difference with Political Economy consists in the fact that Adam Smith and David Ricardo did not go back to exchange value as a form of expression of value.

It is one of the chief failings of classical economy that it has never succeeded, by means of its analysis of commodities, and, in particular, of their value, in discovering that form under which value becomes exchange value. Even Adam Smith and Ricardo, the best representatives of the school, treat the form of value as a thing of no importance, as having no connection with the inherent nature of commodities. The reason for this is not solely because their attention is entirely absorbed in the analysis of the magnitude of value. It lies deeper. The value form of the product of labour is not only the most abstract, but is also the most universal form, taken by the product in bourgeois production, and stamps that production as a particular species of social production, and thereby gives it its special historical character. If then we treat this mode of production as one eternally fixed by Nature for every state of society, we necessarily overlook that which is the *differentia specifica* of the value form, and consequently of the commodity form, and of its further developments, money form, capital form, etc.

The structure of this script – starting from an immediate form, elaborating an abstraction from it and returning to the immediate form as concrete in thought, or, as a necessary form of a given content – is what repeats itself in the definitions of cost price, price of production and market price. In these last three definitions of price from Book III of *Capital*, the relation between capital and labor is no longer internalized in the relation of a singular capital with a group of cooperating workers, but in the reciprocal relation of capital in competition. What we see in competition is that capital impose on each other the internal determinations of capital, such as the increase of productivity, for example. This means that none of the categories from the internal sphere of capital becomes effective except through the reciprocal action of

capital. It is important to note that the content of each of the steps in the script proposed by Marx in the chapter of the Commodities changes when we consider the three definitions of price in Book III of Capital: the immediate form is the surplus that relates itself to the totality of the capital employed, the rate of profit; the abstraction is the global surplus value produced by all capital; and the return to the rate of profit as concrete in thought means that the profit that the capitalist appropriates is a share of this mass of global surplus value.

Thinking about Marx's definitions of price as a scale problem could allow us to consider the possibility of a future point (more in terms of geometric perspective than in terms of time) capable of circumscribing the market, the division of labor and the form of distribution of surplus as forms of organization that, despite their breadth and complexity, can be localized and contingent.

Compositionality and generative effects²⁰

A central problem in the scalar approach to organization is that of passing between scales, namely, achieving a desirable or coherent compositionality of systems. Certain properties of a system may not hold as we pass from local to global, creating effects whose causes are occluded. A generative effect, as per the work of Elie Adam,²¹ is a certain "loss of exactness" in the mapping between different systems, or between a system and its observables. Adam shows how these effects can be characterized using tools from modern mathematics and systems theory. For us, this is a crucial step in conceptualizing the disjunction between political action and economic complexity. How might decentralized organizations coordinate to achieve global objectives without solely relying on the price mechanism? How do we formulate connections between localized interventions and a global economy? What are the modes of investigating such connections? These are the sorts of questions that a theory of generative effects can be brought to bear on.

The logics of historical worlds²²

One of the main impediments on the way of recasting Marx's conceptual framework in a richer theoretical space, as mentioned in our general overview, concerns the necessary fine tuning both of the philosophical and formal machinery brought from Badiou's philosophy and category theory, on the one hand, and from Marx's analysis of capitalism, on the other,

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20 Meeting recording available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FJZuR3dHX0&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=3

21 Adam 2017

22 Meeting recording available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMo12Rox0Cg&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=4&t=17s

so that the former might be adequately restricted while still providing a broader framework for the consideration of value, capital and economic relations, one that opens space for a more structural and compatible outlook on collective organization and action. A first step in this direction was taken through an investigation of Kojin Karatani's "transcendental" analysis of social formations in *The Structure of World History*.²³

Building upon the results of a reading group centered around his work²⁴, we investigated the possibility of using Karatani's theory of the four modes of exchange as a means to specify the formal make-up of historical social formations — a way to restrict Badiou's theory of the transcendental structure of worlds in general to model exclusively the multilayered structure of the capitalist world, itself dominated by commodity exchange, but also dependent on State, communal and National dimensions of sociality. To investigate this possible theoretical bridge, we proposed a new reading of Karatani's work, centered on the correlation between spatial and logical dimensions of exchange structures, as well as on the interplay between scalar and informational thresholds in the consistency of social formations.

This investigation led to interesting results, two of which are worth mentioning, since they exceed the reach of Karatani's own work. Firstly, the hypothesis that the field of multilayer network theory can function as a formal restriction to the complete Heyting algebras studies by Badiou, allowing us to code the different modes of exchange as transcendental *subsystems* dominated by one of them. Secondly, the critical engagement with Karatani's theory of free association led to a fruitful discussion around the distinction between *principal* and *non-principal ultrafilters* in set theory as a way to work through the distinction between the money-form and other possible economic systems that do not rely on a single exclusive commodity as means of circulation.

Causal powers, consciousness and scale²⁵

In the field of neuroscience, theories of consciousness face the challenge of explaining how subjective experience can appear out of brain matter and neural mechanisms. Incidentally or not, Integrated Information Theory (IIT)²⁶ – currently one of the main candidate theories – attempts to tackle this problem through a mathematical account formalizing the relations between notions like organization, causal powers, information,

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23 Karatani 2014

24 All meetings from the Karatani reading group are available here: <https://www.karatanigroup.com/>

25 Meeting recordings are available here — part one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUFeeqU7Jhk&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=5&t=7s — and part two: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7365bwlM7c&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTKiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=6

26 An overview of the recent formulation of IIT 3.0 can be found at: <https://journals.plos.org/ploscompbiol/article?id=10.1371/journal.pcbi.1003588>

scales and phenomenology. One can't help wondering whether this theory could also speak to the problems posed by our research project – not of neuronal, but of political organization. At its center, IIT posits an isomorphism between subjective experience and the structure of integrated information specified by a system's internal organization and current state. In order to arrive at this statement, it argues that it is by *unfolding* the set of causal powers – understood as cause-effect constraints quantified by probability distributions over its state space – of a system's internal mechanisms, that one can understand, in an immanent way, its relation to subjective phenomenology.

The analysis of causal constraints of an integrated system, according to IIT, reveals an intrinsic space of informational relations whose compositional structure constitutes a space of phenomenological appearance. In other words, it is the inner self-consistency produced by an organized system which *makes it* phenomenologically self-appear. An intriguing hypothesis then, is whether we can consider IIT as a restriction of Badiou's Logics of Worlds, where appearance is also the result of the inner consistency of a transcendently organized space, supplement it with a calculus of causal powers in a way that it can productively inform our developing framework of political organization and political economy – while being mindful of unwarrantedly contrabanding scientific metaphors and straightjackets to it. The wager is that endowing a world with causal powers and informational consistencies can give us tools to think about problems of scale that appear throughout social systems and also grasp the double perspective of political/economical binomial through the causal power/information duality. Moreover, this might help us come closer to the reality of political organization, where an assessment of the dispositional profile of an organization (what it can do under certain situations) in addition to a descriptive account of its internal norms (which rules govern its functioning), is paramount to an evaluation of its political *effectiveness*.

An example of the potential value of this approximation, is the recent work on causal emergence developed by Erik Hoel²⁷ based on the IIT framework, which shows that against the presuppositions of physical reductionism but also of political localism, the “macro can beat the micro”, and that certain systems can process information more effectively at higher and more abstract scales of organization than finer ones even if this means reducing the state space of a system, i.e. collapsing the complexity of a local spatiotemporal reality into a coarse-grained version of it. Indeed, at the expense of the reduced resolution of social space, the social systems can get rid of its internal uncertainty and noise, thus increasing its overall capacity for effective information being processed at a higher scale. With this, the passage from smaller

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27 Hoel 2016

to bigger scale stops being one of necessary loss and estrangement, but becomes a matter of designing the right coarse-graining function that operates the relevant change in scale: choosing what one wants to *lose*, by collapsing fine grained social descriptions onto a lower dimensional space, in order to *gain* a certain type of informational effectiveness. Here, the market price system may appear as one of many solutions, in which local spatiotemporal knowledge of the “man on the spot” is collapsed in a price signal reflecting changes in supply and demand that is globally and effectively available to the system.

A theory capable of thinking the passage from local political organization to global political economy, must deal not only with the scalar problem but with the discontinuous shift from politics to economy. In our theoretical space, social organization should be differentially seen depending on whether we use political or economic lenses to observe it. If from an economic standpoint, social organization can be seen as an information system for communicating local knowledge and coordinating resources through a principle of exchange of equivalents, where information flows through a channel as Shannon's information theory of communication would want, from a political standpoint, the sites which were symmetric according to equivalence exchange give place to the asymmetry of power relations, where sites relate to each other insofar as they differentially constrain each other's state space (e.g. of actions, beliefs and resources); power is not only a matter of actually acting (e.g. controlling the flow of resources and information through plunder and redistribution), but also the potential to act, imposing causal constraints of domination (restriction of action space) and protection (causally preempting the influence of third ones to dominate). Conceptually, we are dealing with the very definition of *causal information* formulated by IIT and which can be seen as a reinterpretation of Shannon's information under the light of the development of causal inference (Judea Pearl). At the juncture of political economy, causality may meet information again.

*Space and Logic*²⁸

Badiou's objective phenomenology gives an account of how the “space of appearing” is governed by a logic that nonetheless is grounded to a material base. Already there is an interplay between space and logic that governs how sufficiently expressive worlds function. This justifies the view that the logic of a space is completely immanent to the space itself and that it can be recovered from the gluing and compatibility conditions of its subobjects.

This brings up the question: how do we leverage this connection to interpret truth on a phenomenological space? Badiou's answer

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28 Meeting recordings can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpB8lsmNIA&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTkiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=7 — for part one, and: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtKTuqsPE7Q&list=PL8OmIRZsRoAJTkiCl6JB0xe4_fXd8aio8&index=9 — for part two.

in *L'immanence des Vérités*²⁹ is through non-principal ultrafilters. An ultrafilter is in a sense a “maximally consistent set of propositions”-- a choice that decides the truth of every statement given in such a way that all choices are mutually compatible and non-contradictory. It forces a space to obey the law of the excluded middle. But ultrafilters come in two distinct varieties: principle and non-principal. Principal ultrafilters are generated by a decision at a point, always taking the form of “all sets containing this point.” They are dictatorial in that everything is filtered through a singularity, the primary example of this being Capital. Non-principal ultrafilters though, whose very existence require a weak form of the axiom of choice, derive their power from an infinite covering that is not reducible to any finite choice.

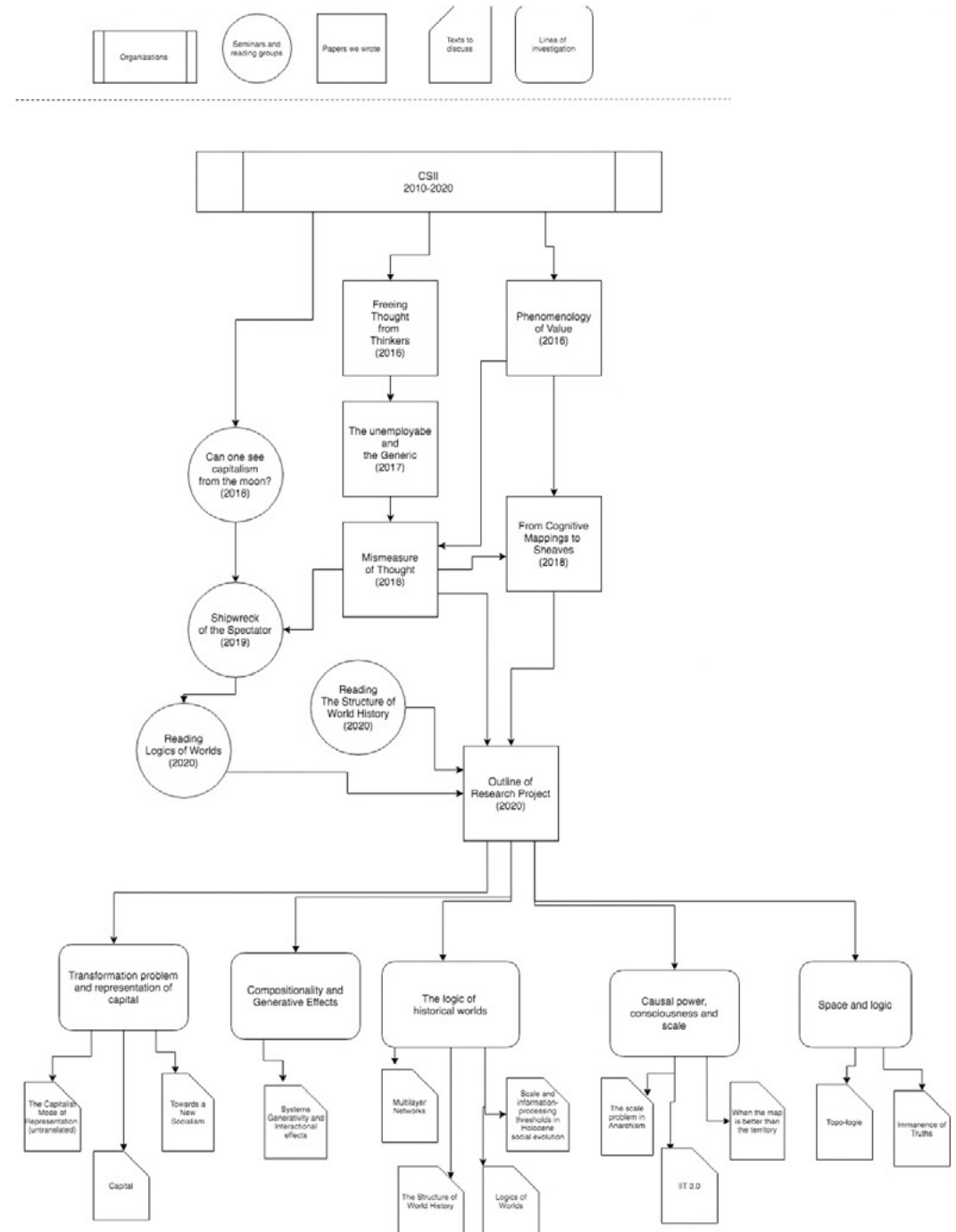
So non-principal ultrafilters represent an infinite break with the state of things as they are-- an infinite singularity if you will, but what does this have to do with our axiomatic approach? Badiou's claim that the construction of a non-principal ultrafilter is the goal of any emancipatory politics is all well and good, but it does not give us the tools to construct such a thing, only that if we could base our politics in it then it would transcend the power of the One. To remedy this, we turn our attention to model theoretic forcing where the non-principal ultrafilter is generated by an infinite set of axioms whose intersection is nil and will thus naturally extend to a non-principal ultrafilter. By gluing models together indexed on the base space along the ultrafilter, Łos's Theorem³⁰ gives a new model that forces those axioms to be true.

This is of interest to us since it gives an algorithm to build new models out of old ones in such a way that certain axioms are true. It gives us the tools to, for example, think of models of capitalism as a special case of a larger space of modes of exchange and value-forms. The use of this line of inquiry is not the mathematics itself, but how it can open horizons to shift our perspective from a critical to an axiomatic one. Non-principal ultrafilters give the framework for the thought of an infinite singularity, but it is in mass politics that this thought can enter the real.

29 A translation of the relevant chapter into english can be found at: <https://stp.ideaandideology.com/notes/the-infinite-by-immanent-dimensioning-of-parts-excerpt-from-immanence-of-truths>

30 A clear treatment of ultrafilters over spaces of propositions and Łos's Theorem with a philosophical inclination can be found at: <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~jasonturner/storage/Ultrafilters-Web.pdf>

Visual overview



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Pandemonium Education – or a Teacher’s Manifesto Against “Social Distancing

Raquel Varela & Roberto della Santa

Abstract: The year 2020 began with two momentous social-metabolic turmoils: the deepening of the global capitalist crisis and, since mid-January, the planetary diffusion of the new coronavirus. Since then, from mid-March on, schools, institutes and universities of basic, professional and superior level have suspended their activities and different sectors are being forced to interrupt part of their production processes and services, although unevenly across the Planet. What should it be the teachers’ stand on all of these world-historic processes and events? Will emergency remote instruction and the digitization of learning processes be written in the stars of our collective destiny? Will the physical and psychic development of children and youngsters go unscathed? Can objective knowledge be reduced to competence descriptors? What role should information technology play in public education? Is there a viable hegemonic alternative to this new academic dystopia 4.0? What is to be done? And where to begin?

Keywords: Covid-19, education, teaching, technology, schools

"To these (fallen angels) Satan directs his Speech, comforts them with hope yet of regaining Heaven, but tells them lastly of a new World and new kind of Creature to be created, according to an ancient Prophesie or report in Heaven; for that Angels were long before this visible Creation, was the opinion of many ancient Fathers. To find out the truth of this Prophesie, and what to determine thereon he refers to a full Council. What his Associates thence attempt. Pandemonium the Palace of Satan rises, suddenly built out of the Deep: The infernal Peers there sit in Council."

(Milton, In: Paradise Lost, 1668 Argument.)

Introduction

The Sars-Covid pandemic made possible the unimaginable – a laboratory, in a scale of millions of students, professors, parents and guardians – in a simultaneously global “here-and-now”, in almost the entire Planet Earth, with human subjects to what is called “*Ensino à Distância*” (EaD, in Portuguese). The quotation marks are due to the hard translation to idioms from the Global North, by one side, and, by another, demarks what was once understood, both legally and conceptually, as *remote teaching* and/or *e-learning*. The results of emergency remote instruction were unambiguous: it is virtually impossible to teach at and with what is called now “social distance”. Or – if you will – actual education presupposes all its very opposite.

This quick-fix with distance education does not produce authentic knowledge. It’s a homeopathic dose of fragmented information.

This transforms the professor into an instrument of a computer that commands programs, contents, methods, times and rhythms of work. The teacher passes from that to become a machine's appendix, such as a new Chaplin of *Modern Times*. It will increase, for that, the so-called "*Burnout*", the alienation, the dismay. It is the factory-teacher – a new level of proletarianization and discontent of teachers worldwide – that opens up a standard test, at the worst American style, and students respond, prepared to a future assembling line in which they will be inserted by this educational neoliberalism. Expropriates – even more – students from working class and middle classes. Distance teaching also expropriates creativity from professors and deprofessionalizes them, more even, besides destructing their personal, family and social life. At the end – transforms its own house in a productive unity of global capitalism.

Naomi Klein, the well-known North American intellectual, explains in her book *Shock Doctrine* how governments and companies use "catastrophes" to apply measures that, before them, would be unacceptable to the population. The era of learning automation has arisen and offers itself as a true dystopia. Without social and political resistance to the lack of professors or to the control of their wages, they will be replaced by artifacts incapable to replace the teaching work. Because, in all countries where "remote education" is being introduced, the ratio of students per teacher/computer increases (which becomes a hybrid type of computerized teacher). Should that be called the state-of-the-art "brave new world"?

Students – these relational social mammals and their highly developed cerebral telencephalon – will not be able to acquire or produce any knowledge, because knowledge depends on a volitive-emotional relation, both collective and intentional, that is established in time and space and creates itself between human beings – will only consume informations that they can look for in search engines, such as Google, this up-to-the-minute post-modern Oracle. With distance teaching we objectify teachers and students. Do we love a computer's bidimensional screen or those we can hug, smell or feel? However, *Ipads* and/or *Softwares* are being massively bought by counties with our taxes. And, the icing on the cake, the personal datas from "students" and "teachers" are, automatically, "given" to market-study companies and public-opinions researches so well used by people with such indole as Steve Bannon hired to elevate popularity of people with the character of Jair Bolsonaro (students from Portugal are already using tests, in public school, elaborated not by teachers, but private non-scholarly companies). This is the actually existent so-called "brave new world" of labour automation in education. It is all about the fact of learning privatization through those "partnerships" and the brutal reduction of costs with teachers, generating a market with public funds, through those partnerships, and decreasing public debt; paying less to teachers and creating one more

generation expropriated from art, culture and science, dependent on computers – being prepared to a new automatized labour market.

Finally, all studies proved that more than 2 hours of screen daily, in kids and teenagers, produce severe neurological effects. How is it possible that educational leaders are the ones to impose or authorize even 30 minutes of screen to children that passes already the hole day, outside school, stuck at home, alone, with smartphones, obese, dissocialized, hyper-stimulated, and depressed? This so-called distance teaching is no teaching at all. It is the automation of present (professor) and future (students) labour.

Sickness, death, unemployment and/or *lay-offs* are not much of soothing terms. However, to write present history, is imperative – unfortunately – to make use of them. The combination between brutal international economic crisis and global pandemic emergency brought a general frame, all catastrophic, to the lives of millions of workers around the world. It is not possible – nor even desirable – to ignore the magnitude of social, economic, political and/or cultural problems involved, above all for those who live from their own work. In this sense, we consider the attempts to elude an exceptionality in the diverse spheres of life a true outrage to human dignity, in general. In education, particularly, it is about something just as much or even more disastrous — having in mind that it comprehends precisely that vital activity in the formation of full human beings. This present manifest-essay starts from an essential defence to the fundamental rights of life and work, without leaving aside the right to education and culture to everyone. As different teachers from a variety of fields of knowledge, neither could we agree with so-called "shock doctrine" that aims to adduce a "technological dystopia", what political analysts alerts us – in their books, essays and breathtaking articles of in its specialty.¹

The impact of measures adopted in the matters of COVID-19 in the world of labour

The several strategies adopted to contain the spread of coronavirus or COVID-19 had an impact on approximate 2.7 billion of workers in the whole world, and around 1.6 billion students in over 170 countries. The World Bank defends that an interruption of the academic calendar for

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1 Naomi Klein (Montreal, 1970) is the author of books such as *No Logo: The Tyranny of Brands* (2000), a kind of manifesto of the alterglobalization movement, and *The Shock Doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism* (2007), the latter in which she described how companies take advantage of natural disasters, wars and / or other "shocks" to advance with austerity policies, which, according to the author, produces the impoverishment of populations, the enrichment of an unscrupulous minority and, usually, riots, which the State tries to curb with violence and fraud. In a recent piece, she states that: "Google and Amazon use chaos to shape a digital future under their control with more confinement: work, schools, doctors and delivery at the door - in a hyper-vigilant partnership between the State and corporations": <https://outraspalavras.net/outrasmidias/naomi-corporacoes-tentam-acelerar-distopia-tech/> (Accessed 03/06/2020).

a lapse of “indeterminate time” will cause unavoidable “educational losses.”² Having as a premise the initial regime of quarantine and the necessity of physical distance, a true front of multilateral organisms were formed – a sort of global coalition of emergencial “distance education” –, that, with a level of coherence and unity seen few times in the history of humanity, organized itself to guarantee, galvanize and coordinate the use of institutional packages, digital platforms and virtual technologies – from basic teaching to the academic postdoctoral degree itself: without the lines and scruples as such as from UNESCO or ILO, e.g., The WHO, UNICEF, WORLD BANK, OCDE, BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION, LEMANN FOUNDATION, VALHALLA, BANK OF AMERICA, AT & T, NOVARTIS, GOOGLE, MICROSOFT, FACEBOOK, ZOOM, MOODLE, HUAWEI etc. etc. etc. aligned themselves, more than in one coalition for global education, in a true “business counter” of school certification – turned to create surplus-value. Beyond that, there is a whole paraphernalia of institutes, NGOs and public-private partnerships – with a “philanthropic-mercantile” character or similar – which every year invests, massively, in converting it capital through, both curricular and extra-curricular propositions, to public education, in the most diverse levels.

The centrality of classroom schooling education or, in short, *de facto* education

Our position as educators is clear. “Distance teaching” cannot (and should not) replace classic classroom education, based on school or university institutions. Already for a number of fundamental reasons. Objective knowledge – taught in schools or universities – presupposes the process of forming intellectual and moral capacities that the student **does not yet have** and that he will start to acquire, as the new scientific, philosophical or artistic concepts produce new subjectivations in his thinking and language. This requires that the students’ study-activity be pedagogically guided by the teacher, who offers the necessary didactic support so that the appropriation of the new categorial complexes is, therefore, objectified by each of them, with their different rhythms and intensities of development. The act of teaching is a non-material production of a simultaneous type similar to what is, for example, the medical act. We explain. In addition to producing materially, human beings stand out from other species not only for transforming nature, which surrounds us, but also for transforming the very human nature that inhabits us. In addition to hospitals, mobile phones, schools and vaccines, we previously produced concepts, images, values or habits – that is – non-material goods.

² Link accessible: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/edutech-covid-19>. (Accessed 03/06/2020). More, Leher 1999, pp., 19-30.

Within **non-material** production, there is one that separates itself from the producer, just like a canvas painted by the artist, and one that does not separate from it, such as the profession of the physician and the teacher. Diagnosing a patient and teaching a student is always a **simultaneous** “production” to the “product”, whether it is the cure of the patient or the education of the student. It is because of these specific characteristics of labour from physicians, nurses and teachers that it becomes so difficult to “dehumanize” them in such vital activities. Education is produced-consumed in the same space-time and therefore assumes a direct relationship: *that actual interrelation*. The didactic resources, hence, are mediations for the realization of such an act that is interpersonal and, therefore, presupposes the presence, of teacher and student, in reciprocal, dynamic, real interaction. The fact that there are resources does not mean that such an act ceases to exist or should be replaced or mediated in essence by artefacts.

Obviously, we consider the work of the doctor and the teacher to be quite different. In this sense, colleagues could ask us why the comparison with a profession so steeped in overfragmentation, hyper-specialization and so subsumed in the very fabric of the commodity, in addition to being highly hierarchical, from the dichotomy conception–execution. But despite the fact that the medical work is much better paid and, obviously, with greater social prestige, both are fundamental for the production – and reproduction – of the social being.

The applications of – scientific-social, technical, historical-philosophical, and artistic – knowledge related to the social use of language (and thought) in social practices, require the decisive mediation of teachers and their social relations in educational institutions. Teachers can and should elaborate syntheses, selection of information and contextualization, in the academic environment, considering the situation of all students. The pedagogical work of teachers, therefore, is not liable to be developed in a systematic and in-depth way by distance education – increasingly linked to competency descriptors that suppress knowledge and its social application. Questioning common sense – and the ideological dispositions that make it up – demands theories, methods, programs, categories, and experiences, which are then brought to life by the school institution as a whole. They cannot be replicated by simulations or simulacra.

This act is not reducible to the event of assimilating new information. It is a whole process – the formation of new cognitive, affective, motor and sensory capabilities. In addition, it presupposes the student's integral involvement in the learning process, not limited to the so-called logocentric scope, but necessarily requiring the mobilization of various affective processes, co-participating in the very construction of meaning in what is learned. We need to mention that school education is not an individual activity, for each student, which merely occurs

in a group-context; but a system of activities, collective, which is, in its fundamentals, shared, in which reciprocal fertilization, between children and young people, has a decisive role in the affective-cognitive development of each other. Considering this whole complexity in the act of teaching, it is clear that it can not be produced, in all its potentialities and/or plenitude, with our students confined at their homes, without possibility of meeting and sharing with teachers and their colleagues except by virtual means, when these are available. The curriculum is not a mere “list” of themes and contents that should be subjected to a kind of final “check-list”. The complete replacement of classic lecturing master classes would be the ideal way for any meaningful education, and emergency remote instruction will only be able to mitigate exceptional situations, no more than that.

The central importance of integral development

“Distance learning” – non-classroom activities, remote classes and/ or *e-learning* – brings in itself a series of complex problems, very serious, to integral development of children and the youth beyond the growing inequalities in education and situations of suffering. From the perspective of human motricity, society already suffered huge radical alterations,³ because we live today in a digital world that is overpowering, especially to children and young people. Children today live their bodies at their fingertips. Digital information technologies have forced our bodies to other unexpected functions, since the phylogenesis of human anatomy. At early ages, we need to move the body, we need to be active, to gain more autonomy, to take risks. It is also interesting to exercise this activity that all animals do when they are small: exploring, discovering, taking chances – to play. The management of the concept of free time⁴ after the advent of the new coronavirus pandemic across the globe decreed a kind of “emergency of play”, as suggested by Prof. Dr. Carlos Neto, from the Human Motricity Faculty. Suffering, of a psycho-physical nexus, implied in situations of anguish and discouragement, in this crisis, was aggravated by the large-scale imposition of docile bodies, empty minds and cold hearts. The metabolic syndrome caused – diabetes, obesity, etc. – boosted COVID-19 itself. It is the deepening of an authentic epidemic of “motor illiteracy” of students. If the traditional school was already absolutely concentrationary, what about – then again – this new technological fetishism?

3 See BBC Portuguese: Dos pés à cabeça, os problemas de saúde que a tecnologia pode causar: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-46559922> (Accessed 03/06/2020).

4 NETO, Carlos. “Decreto o estado de emergência para o brincar na infância” (Jornal I): <https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/697544/carlos-neto-decreto-o-estado-de-emerg-ncia-para-brincar-na-inf-ncia-?seccao=Portugal> (Accessed at 03/06/2020).

Pathogenic risks exist, say authorities in the matter

It is almost a scientific enlarged consensus – being from defenders or detractors of digital media – that a non-interrupt and continuous exposition to the stimulus and response scheme, from virtual platforms, is a pathogenic risk factor, especially severe to developing children. Repetitive behaviors are assimilated there – by the cerebral cortex – as a form of “satisfaction.” This stimulates the release of neurotransmitters – such as dopamine – known as the “pleasure hormone.” The use of electronic games for only eight minutes – according to studies – already causes this to happen. This interaction, via digital media, also activates these same brain mechanisms. It is practically the same feeling as casino customers in slot games and is analogous to the consumption of narcotic drugs and psychotropic drugs, such as heroin or cocaine. For that was decided – in the new OMS International Classification of Diseases – to include this condition under the name “gaming-disorder”.⁵ The pattern of frequent and persistent behavior in screen addiction can lead to prefer screens over any other interest in life. The criteria established to this diagnosis will include: not having control over frequency, intensity and duration with connection with equipment, prioritize this kind of virtual interaction over other activities and keep or add time of use, even after negative consequences. Even so when we must take a critical stance in relation to the perspective of neurosciences or analogous ones, which in general are very marked by a scientific neopositivism with a “biologizing” basis – which is evident in the textual bases and perspectives of DSM-4 – after all, there is no room for social subjects in dopamines and no human agency can be found in the synapses range, the risk involved is self-evident in terms of human development. And we could talk even more at length about the so-called “attention capitalism” – an alert popularized by the recent feature film *The Social Dilemma* – regarding “social media”, to fiercely dispute the social forms of consciousness, the elevation to umpteenth power of Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord’s cultural pessimism stood for.

The development of digital platforms in the field of education, however, is much more serious. The digital interface shifts the student’s attentive focus from typical terrain to inferential synapses, on which advanced cognitive functions are founded, to areas where motivation, skill and triggers become one and the same. There it does not count if the student developed his / her superior psychic processes, *e.g.* complex thinking, directed attention, volitional memory, abstract reasoning, aesthetic sensitivity, creative imagination and scientific conceptualization, in a consistent and sophisticated bias. The regress is self-evident – for any specialist in education, psychology and/or

5 OMS webpage: <https://www.who.int/fr/news-room/q-a-detail/gaming-disorder> (Accessed 03/06/2020).

neurology. But it becomes as or more blunt when it comes with the seal of all Ministers of Education. In addition to the usual social media, television, mobile phones, and video games, there are now hours of “tele-school” and / or “distance learning” for much, much more than the maximum ratio of 2 hours per day. There will be no incentive program for free street-play or public use of bicycles capable of reversing this if part of the public educators does not speak clear, effectively, against this vile debacle.

In defence of the teaching act against “competence pedagogie”

It is past hour and time to speak seriously about the generalization of “pédagogie par compétences” (Philippe Perrenoud) instead of the act of teaching objective knowledge. The various illusions of the so-called “knowledge society” are absurdly ingrained in school curricula, methods and programs. Too much water has passed under the bridge of educational controversy among traditionalists and renovators so that what is essential comes to the fore, for critical theory in these domains. Perhaps the most primal mystification is precisely this. Listen carefully CEOs and “markets”: knowledge and information are not the same thing. So-called “competencies” cannot and should not replace objective knowledge. For whom and what is public education for? The educational thinking produced in the field of the European Commission for Education can be summarized in the so-called *human capital theory*: “improving skills and access to education”, “focusing on market needs”, “helping Europe in globalized competition”, “Training young people to the current labor markets” and, of course, “responding to the consequences of the economic crisis”. In the post-COVID-19 scenario, and in the slogan of “new normal”, “new” bias of digitization 4.0 is accentuated. European leaders in the last quarter of the century considered that the school's main mission is to support the markets and that the solution to the issues of unemployment and inequality lies in a better combination between “education” and the “social” and “needs” so-called “economic”. The new “shock doctrine” radicalizes, now, the aspect of “tech dystopia” in the global context. A true abyss looms in the asymmetry between McJobs, *short-term on-the-job training*, in reference to undifferentiated jobs, without labour rights and of very low remuneration, and MacJobs, fix jobs, of high qualification and with social security, the *higher education schooling*. But the contrast between the basic and the top job market, McDonald's Corp. or Apple Macintosh, is not enough to talk about integral formation. These changes in the labour market should be enough to arrest the official discourse – of “knowledge society” – in educational policies. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is then forced to cynically recognize that “not everyone will have a career in the dynamic ‘new economy’” – in fact, not the majority – so curricula

should not be conceived as if everyone could “get there.” The replacement of objective knowledge by the so-called “competences” respond, then, to a social and economic demand flourishing, for labour flexibility and plastic adaptability of workforce around the world. The education program, for capital itself, is quite clear – even didactic! – in its “noble” aspirations.

But an authentic education can only be conceived as a social production of the humanities, that is, in the sense of the social appropriation of real world properties (the good or “what we can know”; Science), of the valorization (the just or “what we should do”; Ethics) and, finally, aesthetics/symbols/allegories (the beautiful or “what attracts us”; Art). Such spheres of life are inserted in the production of ideas, projects and signs that characterize us as humans. In a nutshell, it is about the production of objective knowledge about culture, that is, the whole of mankind production and about nature – including human nature itself. The teacher's work deals with mediations, of different orders, aimed at the appropriation / objectification of the very world of mankind, although second nature – or autotelic self-creation – both *praxis* and *poiesis* and, therefore, should not be reduced to the commodity-form. The instrumental, pragmatic and utilitarian rationality prevalent in the order of capital cannot dominate critical rationality aimed at the horizon of social emancipation. In general, competences are associated with learning descriptors, which are purely operational and utilitarian content, which keep them away from science and knowledge. For this knowledge to become a commodity itself, it is necessary to re-signify it as a “competence”, because, in this way, it is possible to incorporate it in technological artefacts – or, more precisely, in the predictive algorithms of artificial intelligence – and, also, in the various large scale standardized tests. Mass Distance Learning Courses (MOOCS) are anchored in the Tuning Project of global competencies. It is in this way that capital exercises active control over what is thought of in schools and universities. An example here can be illustrative. In the last national examination of the Portuguese language there was some basic revolt among the best teachers of language, literature and culture. They asked the same question: why does a discipline like Portuguese have its examination elaborated from base-models of the hard sciences? They answered themselves. There is a kind of primacy, of these same, that has already become an official ideology. It is necessary to have a certain model of scientific objectivity in which all questions ask for a single predicted answer, a certain kind of “ortho-answer”, then fixed with the force of the law in the so-called “solution scenarios”. Only in this way would an “objective” quantification be possible in which the proletarianized teacher, as a new “automaton corrector”, loses once and for all any autonomy and decision-making power. Nevertheless, back again, who examines the examiner?

Direct democracy, again and again

What should have been done when making decisions about education in the midst of the crisis? Let us start with the obvious: no decision could have been made without extensive consultation within the main agents directly responsible for the production and reproduction of teaching acts, namely, the professorship around the world, of all levels, areas and modalities of public education. Only the commitment of teachers can make Decree-Laws or Specific Ordinances to be *de facto* done and not converted into dead letters. For the sake of democracy, therefore, only educators could have backed the decisions that involved not only their respective psychological and physical integrity but, above all, their scientific professionalism. This was not – however – what really happened. But what happened instead? For the maintenance of the national final exams in accordance with the preliminary timetable and the perspective of, even with the due adaptations and flexibilities stated, equivalent to the classroom teaching schedule, prior to the emergency “non-classroom” regime of instruction, was added, in Portugal, the statement by the honourable Minister of Education, in an interview with the newspaper Público and radio Renascença, that “we must prepare ourselves to have some combination of distance and in-person teaching” in the next school year. “We must prepare ourselves to achieve by September — or maybe not September, but if possible by October, or November — what the British named “*b-learning*”, a conjugation between a combination of distance learning and face-to-face education,” says the Minister of Education, Mr. Tiago Brandão Rodrigues. The Minister also said that “the recovery of less consolidated learning [of the year] will have to be one of the fundamental pillars for returning to school [in 2020.2].” No ministerial approach could be worse. Not only was it established by the ministry that the non-face-to-face regime already takes on the force of law equivalent to face-to-face teaching – falling apart the legal distinction of “distance learning” – but the complementarity and reversibility of one teaching modality to the other was assumed. Has sustained knowledge or political will been lacking? Most likely both. Challenging, interesting activities that seek to cultivate and keep alive the flame of interest and enjoyment for learning could have been proposed. That could maintain a link between educators and students. That they mitigate the suffering of the students and try a point of view of the school community. But no. This followed in the pre-crisis schedule. The “opportunity” was lost, not to automate a new education in tech dystopia of digital 4.0, but of what the classics called the suspension of the judgment of everyday life towards the living genericity of the human species. The unified platforms of art and culture history constituted the largest historical-world aesthetic collection and it became possible to make visits to collections, museums and/or inventories the most

spectacular existing on the face of the globe,⁶ and only that which global computer networks gathered in the last period in terms of visual and visual arts would be enough to fill – of beauty and dignity – the months of physical confinement of millions of students.

Not only was the country placed in a kind of Aesopic fable – and make-believe – but new content was taught through the non-face-to-face regime. New Math and Language classes, for example, took place. This is absurd for students and outrageous for teachers. And what about physical education classes or artistic education in a non-classroom regime? What happened was a mockery – an impromptu improvisation – it cannot be called teaching, or even remote teaching.

What is the role of technologies in education?

We are not teachers against technical progress or scientific development. Actually, we are enthusiasts of technical reproducibility factors as socialization of *savoir-faire* and we have introduced, extensively and profoundly, several apparatus in didactic-pedagogical projects as means of support in our schools or universities *campi*. But the massive amount of *Big Data* is a systematic set of events, processes, facts, news and information without the fundamental mediation of an education oriented towards arts, science, culture and philosophy – the world wide web is navigations and the shipwrecks, meaning, once more it is proved to be fundamental, and preponderant, the function of school education. The Internet, without mediations, can make fake-news, post-truth and a series of other harms go viral. The act of teaching is nothing less than essential also to mediate this world, a true universe, in the web. That being said, we believe that activities mediated by technologies should be democratized, *i.e.*, with free internet access with social quality to every student, teachers, community. Democratized access to technological media that make possible creative interactions on the internet is a fundamental premise in the digital world that we live in. Free liberation of several spaces found in virtual school encounters, networks promoting debates about the ongoing crisis and the role of education, should structure universities, institutes, and schools since common platforms to movies and series, orientated access to museums and visual arts, scientific and technological divulgation, etc. etc. etc., open and in interaction with teaching institutions, as new synthesis towards integrating basic, technical, professional, and superior education. In addition, it is necessary to nurture and invest seriously in the development of platforms and public programs exclusive to schools, universities, and institutes.

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⁶ Balbi, Clara. “Acessos ao Google Arts and Culture mais que dobram durante a pandemia”, in: FSP:
<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2020/06/acessos-ao-google-arts-and-culture-mais-que-dobram-durante-a-pandemia.shtml> (Accessed at 03/06/2020).

Rights of students: *where to begin?*

Years of cuts – in public education institutions – bequeathed the legacy of a precarious education, where inequalities have become an enormous division factor. Those who have access to top ranked schools, to exam preparation books and explanations, those who do not have the burden of (re) productive work and those who do not have to work to study have an education that is absolutely different from most of the population that lives from their own work and that has extremely degraded living conditions. To make matters worse, with “distance learning”, these inequalities are proving to be abysmal.

The crisis, both health and economic, is not the responsibility of the students. The inalienable right to public education, of quality, free and referenced by the search for social equality is essential. Is it fair to maintain university tuition fees during this exception? Is it wise to continue the school year – from basic to higher – in already disruptive conditions? Is it honest to proceed with the national exams, which way to enter higher education? Will it be lucid to perpetuate budgetary austerity, cuts, and deterioration in this sector? We need a full education of free time for human development with an authentically omnilateral sense, for everyone, as in the representation of the *Vitruvian Man*:⁷ not to separate scientific and educational aspects, manual and cerebral work, theory and practice. Education cannot be a commodity, but an inalienable social right, a universal public mission, which humanizes us individually and collectively.

Teacher's Duties: *what is to be done?*

In Portugal, the largest national survey on working and living conditions in education is unmistakably indicating teachers professional exhaustion.⁸ Low wages, long hours, and excessive, meaningless bureaucratic work. It is also a huge deficit in the struggle for recognition, in addition to struggles for redistribution, unreasonable individual performance assessments, rankings and/or goals, inconsequential. Most of the teachers, at the end of the day, feel exhausted. There are several factors of teacher exhaustion. Psychic suffering – in the work of teachers – is today a global pandemic. How to understand or explain malaise so diffuse and widespread in the functions, structure and dynamics of an activity so vital to the social production of humanity? In addition to the new health security conditions – requiring fewer students per class and more washbasins and ventilated classrooms – there is an urgent need for

7 Davincian composition that illustrates the notes made by the author (1490), inspired by the work of Vitruvius.

8 INCTVE Inquiry 2018-2020: <https://www.cics.nova.fcsh.unl.pt/research/publications/relatorios-de-projetos-1/inquerito-nacional-sobre-condicoes-de-vida-e-trabalho-na-educacao-em-portugal> (Accessed at 03/06/2020).

an attractive career path and a substantial salary increase for this work sector, essential for the most diverse spheres of life. And an emergency recruitment program to supply the boom of cuts that occurred during the epidemic.

“There is always someone who resists”, as the bard says

The educational system in Portugal is the most important public network in the country. In 2008 there were 2.2 million people enrolled in all levels of education, about 20% of the entire resident population. Until the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, education was, among the functions of the State, the one that had the greatest weight: between 1978 and 2008 this expenditure increased from 1.4% to 4.4% of GDP. Almost a decade later, there were changes, with the weight of health and, above all, the public debt to overlap, but public education remained, in budgetary terms, as a pillar of the welfare state in Portugal. State spending on education represented 3.7% of GDP in 2017. In 2017, the number of enrolled students in the educational system remains above 2 million. However, this responsibility has not been raised to the level and type of similar commitment. In addition, which was already bad, became terrible with the automatic progression to a “school via gadgets”. But, as the musician Adriano Correia de Oliveira sang (“Trova do vento que passa”), which is part of the best protest song in Portuguese cultural history, “*há sempre alguém que resiste / há sempre alguém que diz não*” [there is always someone who resists / there is always someone who says no]. It is today urgently necessary to create a real state of emergency in education through a movement of social protest that reinvents the crisis as a critic of the present time.

The normative restrictions for the use of distance education as an alternative modality to classroom teaching and the non-compliance with class hours for the completion of the school year through remote classes hurt, from death, the sense of justice, scientific vigour and professional ethics of the teaching *corpus*. Teachers need to pull the emergency brake on the train of history and make, then, the continuum of technological dystopia, the automation of teaching and the destruction of reason be thrown away through the air, in defence of science, knowledge, the civil service and, above all, the role of education. The alpha and omega of this struggle initiative can only be the full demand for an effective democratic management of education at all levels, areas, and modalities. Only management or management committees can propose a new start with the “reset” of a stillborn model, with decisions taken by school assemblies or by other types of plenary meetings until a national congress of teachers from all over the country, from provinces and capitals, from North to South, be held. If the first evocation is inspired by Walter Benjamin's acclaimed *Theses on the Concept of History*, here the

suggestion is a direct reference to Bertolt Brecht in his *Theory of Radio*.⁹ He urges the producers not to supply the cultural industry's apparatus, with literary genres of "culinary" consumption. Is there no possibility of avoiding the power of disconnection through the "organization of disconnected ones?", asks the German playwright. Digital platforms – Colibri / Zoom, Hangouts Meets, Microsoft Classroom, StreamYard or Skype – can initially serve to connect educators from all parts of the planet for this purpose, while open access new media within non-proprietary platforms, based on the notion of the free common good, are not being developed.

In this sense, we welcome the First World Congress in Defence of Public Education & Against Educational Neoliberalism (Sept./2020), which took place remotely and with open and free registration. The organization of the World Congress has its origins in the dissatisfaction of workers' education organizations in the midst of the 2015 World Education Forum – in South Korea – when private transnational organizations in the education sector dominated the event and guided the new "distance learning" technologies, the defense of privatization of education and did not give any time or space for workers' representatives to take a stand. As it was said in May 1968: "*c'est n'est qu'un debut*". That they bring us a new omen.

The incarceration of both the technical developments and scientific advancements of computer and telecommunications knowledge in what are the structural limits of the private monopoly of the means of social production makes the tools and machinery that could serve to improve human life under the Planet, today, to be put at the service of their own ruin. The difference between the best of all Artificial Intelligence predictive algorithms and the worst of the teachers is somewhat analogous to that skilfully described – by good old Marx – between, as you may already know, the honeybee and the architect:

"But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and

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⁹ Brecht, Bertolt. O rádio como aparato de comunicação. Est. Av., SP, v21, n60, p.227-232, Ago./2007: http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0103-40142007000200018&lng=en&nrm=iso (03/06/20).

the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more close his attention is forced to be." (Karl Marx. Das Kapital. Vol.1. Part III: The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value. Chapter Seven: The Labour-Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value. 1867.)

Translated by Cian Barbosa

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Homo Pandemicus: COVID Ideology and Panic Consumption

Fabio Vighi

Abstract: This essay reflects on the current social crisis by arguing that panic has become an object of mass consumption. By forcing us to consume panic, capitalist ideology facilitates the acceleration of the economy's main drivers while strengthening its authoritarian grip over the terrified masses. Our "health emergency" is therefore discussed as a historical event that has little to do with the nature of the virus, and everything to do with the nature of capitalism.

Keywords: COVID-19, capitalism, panic, consumerism, death.

"An epidemic of panic is spreading throughout the circuits of the social brain. An epidemic of depression is following the outbreak of panic."¹

The current state of the coronavirus emergency should prompt us to reflect on the power of ideology in an era that was too hastily defined as post-ideological. The fall of the Berlin Wall, *ça va sans dire*, did not free us from ideologies. Rather, stepping out of traditional ideology makes us vulnerable to the tyranny of a one-dimensional thinking calibrated on the anonymous brutality of economic calculation. Through globalization and the emancipation from the Grand Narratives of the past, we have given ourselves over to increasingly subtle forms of manipulation that intercept the visceral dimension of our being. The dissolution of the old symbolic ties has thrown us into the flat and invisible dictatorship of the economy, which is disguised as freedom. This spurious freedom resolves itself in the obligation to produce and consume value (commodities) and consent to official narratives, no matter how unfounded, delusional, or criminal they might be.

Resisting the devastating force of unbounded capitalism is increasingly arduous. Our info-sphere circulates news and data at ever-growing velocity. These signs overwhelm us, breaking down our capacity to absorb them intellectually, thereby condemning us to a semi-permanent state of hypnosis. We might find the moral strength to denounce exploitation, but we are reduced to impotence when it comes to imagining new social structures that could guarantee us a space of autonomy from the capitalist matrix. Hence the perception of a historical time that is both *irreversible* and *inexhaustible*, in which all human experience folds back into a destiny where every event is both posited and presupposed by the metaphysics of capital.

1. I panic, therefore I am

Although cynical and disenchanted in appearance, the contemporary subject is, as Walter Benjamin guessed,² a believer. The inflexibility of

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¹ Berardi 2011, p. 43.

² Benjamin 1991 [1921].

our faith manifests itself in a Pascalian way, that is, in the practical act rather than the work of the spirit.³ If our moral and spiritual life is now devoid of militancy, the active one continues to be devoted to a single cult: the cycle of capitalist accumulation. Elevated to a universal religion, capitalism feeds on the discipline of millions of believers who are persuaded that the meaning of life lies in the satisfaction of its purchasing power. For this reason, the subliminal order not to disturb the law of profit is the ideological figure of our time. And capitalist ideology is particularly effective in the context of a “post-growth” economy that is now desperately intent on denying its ongoing structural implosion. When entire populations are crippled by uncertainty or are falling into poverty, the hypnotic power of a well-rehearsed *narrative of salvation* may work wonders. Most importantly, it allows for the implementation of a Great Reset aimed not so much at global sustainability and social justice,⁴ but at reaffirming the ferocious assertiveness of capital.

We should not forget that over the last decades a merciless type of mass conformity has imposed itself, passed off as the only way to achieve personal fulfilment. In colonizing the unconscious, global consumerism has become sovereign, weakening our symbolic bond with others and consigning us to the solipsistic relationship with capital. The virtualisation of experience has bolstered consumer conformity. The basic problem with our enslavement to the virtual machine and its numbing utopia (an infinite space where countless intelligent agents meet to share and create their realities) is that it deprives us of our potential to establish symbolic relations, thus paving the way for the coming dystopia of authoritarian capitalism. More and more we inhabit a flat ontology without breaks or ruptures, where the subject of the unconscious (the subject defined by its radical inconsistency, which triggers the search for meanings and connections) is abolished. It is therefore truly naive to think that, in the midst of our coronavirus crisis, *homo pandemicus* can change its fate through (class) solidarity. Rather, we must begin by noting that panic is now an object of consumption, and as such it is harmoniously inserted in the anthropological architecture of *homo economicus*.

Consuming panic is the new frontier of capitalist ideology.

Marx's *Capital* begins with the following observation: “The wealth of the societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities.’”⁵ In our epoch, the world dominated by commodities institutes both a global governance dictated by competition between fewer and fewer capitals, and a typically

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3 “Custom is the source of our strongest and most believed proofs. It bends the automaton, which persuades the mind without its thinking about the matter.’ Hence ‘we must kneel, pray with the lips, etc.’ in order to believe (Pascal 1958 [1670], p. 73).

4 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/building-blocks-of-the-great-reset/>

5 Marx 1990 [1867], p. 125.

obtuse brand of individualism that inhibits critical thinking while at the same time fomenting a delusion of omnipotence in the subject/consumer. Narcissistic disorders overlap with the omnipresent injunction to enjoyment, and the effects are there for all to see: cultural desertification (matching the desertification of the planet), and the normalization of psychopathological behaviours of various nature, all attributable to the hardening of an ego unable to sustain the complexity of symbolic relationships. Our (increasingly virtual) capitalist utopia lures us into a false sense of security for it is built on the illusion of eternal time. Yet, predictably, the step from this atemporal illusion to anxiety and panic is very short: “There is no such thing as a time of virtuality, because time is only in life, decomposition, and the becoming-death of the living. Virtuality is the collapse of the living; it is panic taking power in temporal perception.”⁶

The *asocial* model touted as the highest form of individual freedom, in other words, is prone to produce depression. For the subject incapable of introspection – for whom connecting with others amounts to exhibitionistic rituals of virtualised self-promotion (from sexting to food selfies, through a heterogeneous typology of standardised mini-perversions) – life can only contract into a mechanical performance, whose other side is anomie and existential emptiness. Overwhelmed by the speed of information and numbed by simulated over-stimulation, the contemporary subject gives in to “capitalist realism”.⁷ The bottom line, then, is that behind today’s debilitating mass conformity there lies the “mad rationality” of a mode of production whose aim is to transform the entire human experience into exchange value.

By identifying with the object-commodity, contemporary subjects willingly abolish their own singularity. The Cartesian distance between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* evaporates, since thinking subjects (*cogitans*) flatten into the empty objectuality (*extensa*) of commodities, from which they can no longer distinguish themselves. The cause of all this, however, is not to be found in epiphenomena like dystopian technology or political corruption/incompetence, but in a centuries-old process of socialization based on the dogma of the production-consumption of countless things and experiences, most of which are entirely superfluous. Today, at the peak of this historical process, people find themselves not only increasingly immiserated and deprived of fundamental rights (home, food, health), but also *reified*, reproduced serially as extensions of the very commodities they (wish to) consume. Without collective symbolic ties, the mind collapses into the thingness of the object. What until a few decades ago still created a social bond – the

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6 Berardi 2011, p. 40.

7 Fisher 2009.

so-called “work society” – today brings about the decomposition of the human community.

As Ralf Dahrendorf wrote back in the 1980s, “the work-centered society is dead, but we don’t know how to bury it”⁸ – and, we should now add, the stench is becoming unbearable. In other words, we remain defined by capitalist productivism, but we are increasingly unable to extract new wealth (surplus-value) from a living labour now increasingly ousted by unstoppable processes of technological automation. However, the unproductive and atomized individual of neoliberal globalization is today *completely* dominated by capitalist relations. Never before has the fetishistic theology of consumption asserted itself as a totalising ideology, extending to all areas of life, including media, education, and health.

Prey to an economic compulsion perceived as destiny, when faced by a health alert deviously magnified by the capitalist media, *homo pandemicus* can only withdraw into his fragile shell, paralysed by the fear of losing, with life, its purchasing power. No longer able to face the perception of his own transience – which is the only way to live intensely, and imagine a real process of transformation – *homo pandemicus* relies on apotropaic rituals such as the wearing of a mask, finding in mute terror the only comfort and sense of social belonging. Thus, the consumption of panic turns out to be the hallmark of contemporary ideology, expressing the will of the people to continue to be defined by capitalist inertia, despite the real-time collapse of the “society of opulence”. Ultimately, consuming panic implies the stubborn denial of death as the only “object” capable of giving meaning to life. The enthusiasm of living, the love of life, can only arise from the perception that one day we will no longer be here, and from the symbolic processes (desires, aspirations, affects) that this perception brings into existence.

It is no coincidence that philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists have been telling us for decades that our age of material wealth *represses* death.⁹ It is quite clear that this is an ideological type of repression, since it is functional to the imposition of the enchanted temporality of capitalist utopia. Dissociating life from death characterizes all modern culture, because it opens the way for the economic valorisation of every fragment of our existence. The only value that matters is the capitalist pseudo-vivification of life. The abolition of the symbolic link with death, still central in pre-modern societies, allows political economy to establish the repressive socialization of life via its ubiquitous reduction to exchange value. The success of the current emergency narrative feeds on this repression by instrumentally exploiting its *return*, the sudden reactivation of the ghost of our mortality. The shock effect of the

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8 Dahrendorf 1984.

9 See, among others, Ariés 1974; Baudrillard 1993 [1976]; Elias 2001 [1982]; Redeker 2017.

coronavirus *memento mori* is not (at least for now) the solidarity of a humanity aware of its own fragility and finitude, but the intellectual *rigor mortis* of *homo pandemicus*, already mortified by the obsession for security. Sadistically confronted with their own potential demise at the hand of an invisible enemy, consumers fattened by the cult of their own self turn speechless, or stammer (under their masks, behind their screens, or inside their sarcophagus-like homes) an endless series of tragicomic clichés.

2. Ideology today

The media hype around the pandemic has an easy time inoculating the panic-virus in an increasingly anaemic social body, whose identity is nurtured within the magic circle of a grotesquely egocentric individualism. The long history of capitalist social relations today flows into the total commodification of the human being, who is as hyperactive as psychically empty, and therefore helplessly delivered to manipulation. Technology and politics are but *extensions* of the economy’s global domination, and the specific ideological alienation it engenders. Their “biopolitical” purpose (control of life) is ancillary to the power of capital, which today requires entire populations to be docile and meek (that is, isolated, insecure, and scared) vis-à-vis the violent accelerations that rule their lives.

Among these accelerations are the digitization of all sectors of social life (work, education, leisure, etc.), the collapse of the real economy and the expansion of debt (with further austerity measures and cutting of public services),¹⁰ the political normalization of the state of emergency, new and more explicit forms of censorship, and the pervasive and invasive medicalization of life. We are sliding into a new fascist order that replicates at a different level the old objective: using the State to shield and advance the interests of the wealthy elite. The virus provides contemporary capitalism and its politics with the opportunity of a colossal *emotional blackmail*: either with us (lifesavers), or with the ineffable micro-killers and the conspiracy theorists who try to sabotage the official narrative. In the meantime, the usual suspects accumulate wealth and power more and more casually.¹¹ Not happy with seeing their fortunes double or triple over a few months, some of them also have the audacity to tell us, with a philanthropic hand on their bleeding hearts (and the invisible one, of which Adam Smith wrote, on their wallets), that they are working for the common good. With half a billion human beings now falling below the poverty line,¹² it will soon come as no surprise that even starving people are passed off as coronavirus victims.

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10 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/imf-paves-way-new-era-austerity-post-covid-19>

11 <https://ips-dc.org/billionaire-bonanza-2020/>

12 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/pandemic-profits-companies-soar-billions-more-poor-est-pay-price>

Mired in panic and hypnotized by the media fanfare orchestrated by the wealthy, we opt for blind faith instead of legitimate doubt. According to various world-renowned immunologists (including Michael Ryan, Head of Emergency at the WHO),¹³ the mortality rate of the virus, all variables considered, is likely to be between 0.1 and 0.2%, that is, at the level of a “strong seasonal influenza”, as claimed by Anthony Fauci back in March 2020.¹⁴ This means that at least 99% of those who are “infected” carry on with their lives either without a sore throat (the vast majority), or with normal flu symptoms. But numbers can do precious little if they are not inscribed in a winning narrative.

Within the current scenario, it is difficult to ignore the ideological acceleration of mainstream media, which speaks to us with an increasingly arrogant and dogmatic voice in order to censor or delegitimize those who, in a Socratic vein, dare to doubt the uniformity of the narrative. Apart from the resistible rise of censorship, the most common media strategy was captured by Vladimiro Giacchè as a “false synecdoche”,¹⁵ a rhetorical figure describing how a fragment of a factual occurrence (often an insignificant detail) is inordinately amplified in order to spread terror and justify draconian measures. Initiatives such as the recent open letter signed by thousands of Belgian doctors and health professionals,¹⁶ are systematically ignored by the information oligopolies, despite the detailed evidence they muster and their legitimate request for an open debate.

The ideological power of mainstream media lies in instigating fear by exploiting the return of what had been repressed for decades: our finitude, or ontological insufficiency. For *homo economicus*, the death of the producer-consumer is either a positive numerical abstraction (body counting, statistical calculations) or an object of morbid media spectacularization – two sides of the same coin. Death is the exact opposite of the frenzied ubiquity of capital, which grinds all lived experience into economic value. We are told *ad nauseam* that life is sacred. Yet, it is so only as an abstract, dematerialized and economically computable idol. By comparison, dying is an inhuman and inadmissible obscenity, for it is not amenable to exchange. As Jean Baudrillard stressed, “today, *it is not normal to be dead* [...]. To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly, nothing else is as offensive as this. Death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy.”¹⁷

13 On October 5, 2020, Dr Ryan stated that at least 10% of the world population (around 780 million people) are likely to have contracted COVID-19. These WHO “best estimates” put IFR (infection mortality rate) at 0.14%. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-idUSKBN26Q1SI> and <https://swprs.org/studies-on-covid-19-lethality/>

14 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7121221/>

15 Giacchè 2016.

16 <https://docs4opendebate.be/fr/open-brief/>

17 Baudrillard 1993 [1976], p. 147.

The shock we are made to experience today is ideological because it forces us to panic over a traumatic event that was cynically exploited rather than investigated as a *symptom of structural failure*. This failure has many names: the decline of public health systems; the devastating impact of agribusiness and air pollution; the diagnostic and therapeutic errors; the lack of preventive campaigns; the concentration of the elderly and the ill in nursing homes and hospitals at high risk of sepsis; the constant contradictions of “experts” and the politicians they represent, all in turn representing social relations managed by a single impalpable master: the anonymous, ruthless and dehumanizing apparatus of the economy. Because capital as an “automatic subject” (Marx) is not a flesh and blood individual, but instead embodies the *form* of our life by determining its content a priori. The dull compulsion of the “will” of capital dominates the entire management of the health emergency (particularly through the profiteering intercession of Big Pharma), and comes true in the packaging of its ideological text.

But then, what about all the deaths? Any instance or peak of excess mortality *from* or *with* coronavirus (the difference is crucial, though never fully investigated) must be framed precisely as a disturbing failure of the health system and its global political and economic governance. The most blatant evidence of this failure is the cramming of the sick (especially old people with comorbidities) in environments rich in pathogenic microorganisms such as (understaffed and underfunded) hospitals and nursing homes; with the ensuing chaos presented as a “world war against the virus”. Official data say that, already in 2016, hospital infections alone caused 49,301 deaths in Italy,¹⁸ which suggests that an increase in debilitated subjects’ exposure to such a high concentration of pathogens could only result in tragedy. This predisposition to the risk of sepsis is common to many countries where funds to national health systems have been drastically cut.

When we repeat such inane slogans as “our life will no longer be the same”, then, we should remind ourselves that we are speaking through the *capitalist form*, i.e., through the law of profitability that frames us. Furthermore, we should consider that capital survives the contradictions it engenders through violent internal technological-managerial revolutions, famously described by Joseph Schumpeter as the “gale of creative destruction”.¹⁹ This suggests that our life (the “new normal”) is exactly what it was before – only worse. What makes it worse is the terror of contagion and sanctions, isolation from the loved ones, increase in unemployment, misery and depression, suspicion of others, pervasive digital alienation, and so on. The point, however, is that COVID-19 did not

18 https://www.ansa.it/english/news/science_tecnology/2019/05/15/49000-hospital-infection-deaths-in-2016_27242eaa-bffd-43d6-8ff8-6718fe9db5ed.html

19 Schumpeter 2010 [1943], p. 76.

cause these degenerative phenomena; it *accelerated* them. Even before the arrival of the virus, for example, death had been reduced to a private and purely biological fact, as there was no hesitation in letting the sick die anonymously in hospitals or the elderly in care homes, exactly as it is done (even more inhumanely) in the COVID era. Similarly, *a-social* distancing had already been imposed on us through *a-social* networks. From this perspective of “accelerated continuity”, the triggering of a new frontier of ideological manipulation is perhaps the crucial aspect of the current emergency, especially when justified as a humanitarian act. In fact, it would appear that despite years of “humanitarian wars” we have not yet learned that (borrowing from H. L. Mencken) behind every desire to save humanity there is the desire to dominate it.

It is no coincidence that in the last twenty years, starting from the attack on the World Trade Center, the political discourse accompanying the crisis of globalization has employed the oldest and most consolidated ideological weapon: to sow terror in respect of an external agent deemed capable of penetrating and destroying our world. If the War on Terrorism had concrete foundations – the economic and geopolitical contradictions triggered by globalization – its implementation was purely ideological, aimed at justifying a series of nefarious military interventions as a response (violent as well as desperate) to those contradictions. The ideological effectiveness of any catastrophic narrative, however, depends on its flexibility, that is, on the ability to innovate itself creatively. For this reason, the ancestral nightmare of heads severed by hordes of hooded jihadists, which terrorized the Western collective imagination until a couple of years ago, has now been replaced by a new but complementary model of “shock therapy” (Naomi Klein), that of the pandemic virus. It is a model capable of evoking even more devastating apocalyptic scenarios in order to prevent us from realizing how *our epochal crisis – which reduces millions of humans to misery despite the enormous technical potential available to us – has nothing to do with the nature of the virus and everything to do with the nature of capitalism.*

As the reader will recall, the narrative of the deadly virus had already been trialled in 2009, when the H1N1 (“swine flu”) pandemic was declared. However, that narrative only had little traction, resulting in something of an anti-climax.²⁰ Today, however, on the second attempt, panic spreads like wildfire, so much so that we all are, quoting Canadian researcher Alan Cassels, *pre-sick*.²¹ In other words, we belong to tracing and tracking statistics, having become nothing but, as Ivan Illich put it,²² *algorithms* of a health system that frames us within probabilistic

20 <https://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/news/20100907/h1n1-swine-flu-no-worse-than-seasonal-flu>

21 Cassels 2012.

22 Illich 2010 [1976].

calculations. In this sense, the daily “war bulletins” have the simple objective of activating a pre-existing identification mechanism: we, anonymous populations at the mercy of anonymous abstractions, are where medicine (or, rather, the economy that directs it) wants us to be. This triggers a phenomenon that is more unique than rare: for the first time in the history of humanity, it is not the sick who go to doctors, but doctors who look for the sick.

On the other hand, as the saying goes, “he who seeks, finds”: medicine enslaved to the economy (Big Pharma) elevates us all to the noble rank of *predestined*. It would probably help to note, however, that the inventor of the RT-PCR test himself, Kary Mullis, Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1993, had reiterated in no uncertain terms that the test has *no diagnostic value*.²³ The problem is that the genetic material taken from the swab must be massively amplified to be able to demonstrate viral load (several “amplification cycles” are required). This means that, by amplifying this material beyond a given threshold, the PCR test will classify as contagious completely harmless genomes, such as leftovers of infections that are now totally inactive.²⁴ The reasonable doubt about the reliability of the swab with respect to a virus that has not yet been isolated according to Koch’s postulates, has been reiterated by numerous multi-accredited virologists (all duly ignored by mainstream information). It is clear that *homo pandemicus*, riddled with fear and anxiety, prefers to take refuge in faith or superstition. If Jesus multiplied loaves and fish, today we multiply infections and contagions.

The “monster-slammed-on-front-page” logic that characterizes the corona bulletins relies on the widespread perception that the monster is already on our doorstep. The para-religious ritual of numerological information aims to make us believe that we are all, at least potentially, already victims of such monster. This Orwellian assault on our singularity strengthens the ideological character of mass information systems, whereby the problem of the End – of our lives, of our civilization, and therefore of a *derelict model of social reproduction* – is magically transformed into the trauma carried by a dark pathogen embodying Absolute Evil, against which we can only (as it were) “fight together”, though of course the poor and the weak are left to pay the highest price.

3. *Denkverboden* and faceless humanity

The rhetoric of the “world war against the virus”, popularised with perfect timing by Bill Gates and his philanthropic foundations, and underscored by politicians miraculously revitalized by the unexpected opportunity, implies that the only goal is to win the war, regardless of how

23 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGvkG86Yw7U&feature=youtu.be>; see also <https://www.creative-diagnostics.com/sars-cov-2-coronavirus-multiplex-rt-qpcr-kit-277854-457.htm>

24 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/29/health/coronavirus-testing.html>

much it costs, who pays for it, who benefits from it, and what happens next. Because the war on such a monster – which exists primarily as a media representation, just as hell existed in the altarpieces of medieval churches – requires first of all *obedience*, to be understood not only as further limitation of our civil liberties, but above all as *denkverboten*, a prohibition against articulating critical thinking that deviates an inch from the official line.

When airing such views, one can immediately hear the accusation of conspiracy, which is normally made by the “useful idiot” who does not know (or pretends not to know) that *power has always conspired and plotted*. If the course of human history is replete with dazzling evidence of power’s sinister machinations, today the prime suspect for this role is the transnational Moloch known as financial capitalism. However, it is not merely a matter of ruthless figures moved by personal interests or Malthusian persuasions; instead we are referring to a historical and *logical* configuration of the capitalist mode of production whose prerogative is to slip into every corner of our lives, domesticating and softening them to its interests. Whoever holds economic power is, as Marx wrote, a “functionary of capital”, so we would be wrong to personalize blame without recognizing the real enemy in the automatic process that authorizes and directs our lives. It is almost trivial to observe that, today, it is the interests (literally) of capital in its financial version that make the world go around: they hold in their grip entire populations, shape their ideas and actions, and therefore exercise absolute power over that increasingly liquid and naked form of life that we have become. All this while politics, reduced to accountancy exercise or corporate housekeeping (even when rekindled by ancient passions), continues to genuflect to the economy’s diktats.

But it should be added that the coronavirus acceleration also concerns the implosive nature of our form of life: it is precisely the hegemony of the financial industry over the real economy that decrees the defeat of a social model based on the exploitation of human labour (extraction of surplus value from living work organized in countable units of labour time). This is regardless of the fact that exploitation, of course, continues, both in increasingly obscene forms of underemployment and through the creation of those that the late David Graeber with ingenious simplicity called “bullshit jobs”.²⁵ More clearly stated: the financial sector – where not the human being but money is put to work in order to magically create more money – has now achieved almost complete independence from the real basis of the economy, whose profitability has plummeted. To the point that, as Graeber claimed, the system is forced to invent perfectly useless jobs (*bullshit*, in fact) in order to maintain a semblance of structural consistency and viability.

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25 Graeber 2018.

Both in the *Grundrisse* and in the third volume of *Capital* Marx had outlined, albeit with various disclaimers, his theory of the *tendency of the rate of profit to fall* in relation to the increase in *organic capital*, calculated as the ratio between *constant* (machines) and *variable* capital (living labour). Today, after the third and at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution (from microelectronics to artificial intelligence), Marx’s intuition hits us with the force of a final and undisputable verdict: the more investments in hi-tech increase, the more the profitability of capital falls *in absolute terms*, since, given the impact of automation, the human labour that is eliminated can no longer be reabsorbed at the same levels of employment and intensity of production. Like it or not, this internal contradiction of political economy marks the end of the anthropology of work that has characterized the reproductive model of capitalism since the dawn of modernity.

From a “work society” our world is inexorably mutating into a “society without work”, or at least into a “society of shitty work” (to take up Graeber), and it is for this reason that it delivers itself more and more willingly to financial alchemy and related risks. Although as a (precarious) category work continues to define our age, it is clear that the fate of mass wage-labour, presupposition to the creation of societal wealth, is only one: to disappear, or more realistically, to continue to morph into more or less explicit forms of slavery. We are faced with an almost deterministic mechanism that undermines the foundations of our societies, and which pushes capital to seek profitability in the financial/speculative sphere. The “faceless” power of financial capitalism is the power of capital in its *latest disguise*, through which it desperately tries to escape the self-destructive nemesis triggered by its own “moving contradiction”,²⁶ which is now unmanageable. In defining this form of financially leveraged capitalism as “liquid”, we should specify that it is so because it liquidates the anthropological foundations of our social ontology.

Precisely the “faceless” (anonymous, rarefied, algorithmic) but omnipotent power of financial capital suggests a final reflection on the symbol of the fight against COVID-19: the mask. There is something desperate and, at the same time, unintentionally comic, in the consumption of such an ordinary object. Beyond its business – which no doubt drives its media obsession – the obligation to wear a mask reminds us of Beckett’s and Ionesco’s Theatre of the Absurd, insofar as it captures metaphorically the essence of COVID ideology. What essence? Precisely the “facelessness” of capitalist power. In its deepest meaning, the obligation to wear a mask that mummifies us should be read as an attempt to make humanity more and more compliant with the anonymity

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26 “Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth” (Marx 1993 [1939], p. 706).

of contemporary capitalism and its cynical as well as criminal needs. Anonymous capital requires anonymous (isolated, depressed, impotent) subjects. And yet the liberal culture in which we dwell, compromised as it is with the current economic determinism, seems to struggle to grasp the authoritarian involution of our capitalist societies. Or perhaps it grasps it perfectly well, but opts to fight it with the blunt weapon of moralism and washed-out slogans like “capitalism with a human (masked?) face”.

The mask as “voluntary servitude” (Étienne de La Boétie) reflects the acceleration of a process of *soft dehumanization* that has been with us for some time, and which needs us to be identical to capital in its financial disguise. It does so by depriving us beyond measure of our singularity, to be understood *not* as the full and assertive uniqueness of life devoted to consumerist gorging, but, in a much more radical way, as a *lack* to ourselves, a gap between *what we are not* and *what we believe we are*. Only by acknowledging this lack, and putting it to work, can we realistically open up to the hypothesis of an alternative future. A humanity which gags itself vis-à-vis the presumed infection of its neighbour is a humanity without unconscious, that is to say, reduced to obedience because deprived of the elementary tools of critical thinking.

Critical awareness arises from the intellectual risk taken by the thinking subject in recognizing and at the same time rejecting their own belonging to the world as object of reflection. If individuals do not acquire *self-distance*, if they do not think *against* their own identity mediated by the Other (i.e., their language, ideology, privileges, etc.), there can be no critical conscience and no real drive toward transformation. This is why the mask, in its miserable banality, becomes a symbol of the reactionary *denkverboten* imposed on us universally so that no one can oppose the power of an “economic rationality” heading straight into the abyss. The mask that takes away the sins of the living represents the dogmatic coma in which we have fallen, which makes us blind, as well as mute, in the face of the operation of creative destruction currently in full swing.

By instituting a prolonged state of emergency, the capitalist Moloch aims to silence the whole planet, without understanding that, by doing so, it risks self-annihilation, thus following its most intimate vocation. Behind the mask of *homo pandemicus* is the cynical and obtuse grin of *homo economicus* who, by destroying its past, vainly tries to save himself from the contradiction that is slowly but surely devouring him. Some on the left are looking eagerly at this implosive acceleration, believing it may finally generate collective awareness of oppression and the push for paradigm change. It may seem a compelling theoretical point, but in truth we are witnessing the successful *masking* of capitalist chaos through an insidious ideological narrative which is conducive to a more or less overt iteration of fascism. Capitalist realism prevails by colonising the economic unconscious and hijacking the State as ideological manpower. Today, capitalist realism prevails through a plea that is almost impossible

to counter: *saving lives*. How long will this narrative last? And, on the back of its success, which other ideological narratives will follow? Without developing a collective critical awareness of the current predicament, we will soon wake up in a neo-feudal society, or a digitized nineteenth-century dystopia. Growing levels of poverty and despair are likely to result in violent mass revolts, followed by further ideological, and military, wars. Repeating Gramsci, it would seem that a long “interregnum” awaits us, where “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”, and “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”²⁷ After all is said and done about COVID-19, our problem remains our real positivity to the capitalist virus, for which we have not yet invented the vaccine – the only one we urgently need.

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Covid is the New Orange...

Sophie Wahnich

Abstract: The Covid in France was at first underestimated by political and medical leaders. Everyone counted on the development of a group immunity and the virus circulated freely, therefore without sanitary cords. But death became too present and now the cordon could not be established from one region to another, but only virtually from individual to individual. Destitution came because medicine was not ready to face such a pandemic. The lie accompanied public policies that restricted freedoms by calling for confinement, distance work, and by producing a massive economic and social crisis due to a lack of social and health care. The dehumanization of social relations was particularly marked in the EHPADs, where each elderly person was treated as a supernumerary who was either imprisoned or left to die unaccompanied. Since then, nothing has been done to protect democracy or to protect the population. The change of course is that of a reinforcement of neoliberal norms.

Keywords: COVID, democracy, survival, lying, EHPAD, confinement, dehumanization

Covid Season 1, in France

“The alchemists try to take advantage of the passion we have for riches, by promising mountains of gold to those who listen to them (...) But the greatest weakness of men is the love they have for life; and we take advantage of this through our pompous *galimatias* and know how to take advantage of this veneration that the fear of dying gives them for our profession. “(Molière, *Doctor's Love*, Act III, Scene 1.).

1. Public health, herds, and individuals

Numerous, high-ranking, senior physicians stated from January to March 2020 that containment would not be necessary. The little flu, SARS-CoV-2 would certainly cause a few deaths, but we would also make our group immunity. We were a herd and were therefore to be thought of as such. Individuals are good for intimacy and an old revolutionary liberalism attached to human rights, the herd is statistical, from the Old Regime and very current.

Yet China seemed to have suffered a lot in Wuhan. But France was not China.

In France, Great Britain, Belgium, and the United States, the doctrine until the last moment was that of so-called group immunity. It would be obtained when a sufficient number of people had contracted the disease and produced antibodies. Then the virus could no longer circulate, it would be respected and thus useless to stop our activities, it is medieval, sang doctors and epidemiologists.

On February 24th, in a conversation with my local doctor, we were astonished at the lack of preventive measures known since antiquity...

Faced with a new fatal disease, we had to manufacture sanitary cords...

Then the West, under the name of Imperial London College, produced epidemiological curves that predicted the worst. If nothing more was done, the deaths would be counted in millions. So the curve had to be crushed, flattened, and the evil COVID-19 stopped circulating unchecked. So we had to admit that clusters were definitely not cloisters, and that from these clusters of infected people, the virus had penetrated almost everywhere, sowing death at random, because it had not been stopped by sanitary cords.

In France, there was a risk that the capacities of a hospital in a bad state of repair would be overwhelmed after the accounting and managerial treatments it had been undergoing for years, to the detriment of public service logic. Hospital saturation would bear witness to this destruction of a social health security system that, not so long ago, characterized the French welfare state, which was very proud of its hospital system.

From now on, the cordon could not be established from one region to another, but only virtually from individual to individual.

The citizens invited to vote for the municipal elections on Sunday, March 15, 2020, found it inconsistent to maintain the ballot when schools had already been closed following the speech of the previous Thursday.

On Monday, March 16 we were ordered to confine ourselves and had until Tuesday, March 17 at noon to make our arrangements. We were in the desocialization described by Saint-Just when he was worried about the loss of civil confidence fomented by the counter-revolution. According to him, the division of society had led each family to isolate itself from interest, to no longer speak the same language, to no longer have distant marriages and to exclaim "you are ferocious beasts (...) you are savages, you who isolate society from itself or who excite rumors to frighten away the trust that nourishes the citizens (...) each house was, so to speak, a society apart."

But the confinement was to last only fifteen days, our government said.

2. Economic panic

The economist-chemists hoped to be able to maintain their love of gold rather than taking precautionary measures in favor of public health until the last moment. In the face of death, panic gripped Wall Street as investors became alarmed at the economic consequences of the coronavirus. The Dow Jones plunged, the Nasdaq fell, the CAC 40 dropped, and the London Stock Exchange lost points. The precautions were considered too drastic for the economy, too costly.

What does this mean? The real work could no longer be done. The capital gains extorted in an increasingly bellicose manner in France since the so-called labor law, which deregulates the hierarchy of norms of

protective law on the territory, could no longer be reaped. Consumption would be contracted, and the circulation of capital, which determines GDP, would be dangerously slowed down.

This is why what in France stopped on one side had to continue on the other, the incentive to telework for those who could manufacture a continuity of activity with digital tools was insistent. Muriel Pénicaud, Minister of Labor, did not want construction sites to fall behind by stopping. As for those who could provide care and supplies, they would stay at work.... the same Pénicaud imagined that the working day could be increased to 12 hours and the week to 60... The alchemists had their jargon, even journalists put quotation marks "While the coronavirus epidemic is shaking up the world economies and financial markets, the High Council of Financial Stability decided Wednesday to remove by reducing to zero a cushion of "counter-cyclical" capital that banks could not use to lend money. According to Bercy, this gesture allows "to inject about 8 billion euros into the economy."

3. Democracy plays the Chester cat

Control does not protect, it destroys ordinary democracy.

As early as March 18, the Minister of the Interior, Christophe Castaner, announced that "4,095 fines had been distributed to French citizens who did not comply with the containment rules imposed by the government. I underline "distributed" because for me they distribute sweets, end of the year prizes, good points... sometimes, of course, slaps, but it sounds strange to my ears a distribution of fines. One will admire the precision of the statistical facts." "Our objective is not to punish but to protect the French," he said. Should the stick replace a failing civic-mindedness for no longer being valued in a regime of unlimited rivalry? For having led people to believe for so long that "to be free is to declare oneself independent to do evil", the first acts of the government consisted in declaring that we had to confront ourselves with self-constraint and the threat that hangs over us if self-constraint had not been internalized. The derogatory displacement attestations hurt the memory of wartime *laissez passer*. It was associated for better – the rejection of tyranny, and for worse - the confusion between racial discrimination during World War II and the bizarre incitement to civic equality in 2020 in the face of the virus. Very quickly this regime brought back bad memories and bad practices. The denunciation clogged the telephone lines of the police stations. One meditates on the Parisians who left to go green between the 16th in the evening and the 17th at noon. But didn't they take their measures as the president had enjoined them to do? With the danger of death, all shamelessness seemed to vanish in good conscience for good soldiers who were delighted to be able to show once again that they knew how to be docile. Distinguishing between docility and alibi from civic conscience proved difficult. Bad officials told passers-by "tremble!" and instead of

making their power useful to the people, they made it disastrous. “said my friend Saint-Just in 1794. But it was happening close to home...around the corner, far from Rueil and near Saint-Denis. The certificates were printed with a lot of date and time slots. Then they were falsified for the sake of honor... to ratiboise a quarter of an hour of exit gave a vague feeling of resisting the inanity of this state of health emergency.

4. In the absence of welfare state, the lie of the State

Has the Welfare State reappeared? To a certain extent yes, since partial unemployment has been programmed and granted to face the social and economic crisis that the brutal stop of any activity would not fail to bring about. But producing bandages on open wounds is not really protecting, because protecting is foreseeing. The squirrel preparing its nuts for the winter has long been the fetish of the savings and provident books of our childhood.

But for us, the government had only snoring and worrisome words: “it’s war”, the president had repeated to us, expedients and no foresight, no instruments or equipment, no tests or masks.

“Recently there have been some logistical difficulties, but the masks have been arriving in pharmacies since yesterday,” Sibeth Ndiaye, the government’s spokesperson, told us at the end of the March 18 Council of Ministers. She explained that the State continued to release “strategic stocks” for the most affected departments. No masks came into the pharmacies and even patients labeled as such could not access them, they had to manage if they feared contaminating relatives and neighbors.

The State dared to say that the masks were in fact dangerous because they were difficult to use. Always the liar... I couldn’t help thinking about the cover of a little book published by Allia in 2016. A young woman with silver hair listens with an enigmatic smile, a puppet with a very long nose, Pinocchio in the role of state propaganda, this form of falsification of reality that interests the author of the text, Alexandre Koyré in his *Réflexions sur le mensonge* published in 1943. “If nothing is more refined than the technique of modern propaganda, nothing is coarser than the content of his assertions, which reveal an absolute and total contempt for truth. And even simple verisimilitude. Contempt that is unmatched only by the contempt that it implies for the mental faculties of those to whom it is addressed.” We are taken for fools.

Some were ecstatic that for the first time, for the first time, life was protected rather than profits, “whatever it takes. At first I succumbed to this assertion, but it was false, they were just taking the measure that too many deaths would produce an unheard-of protest. It was necessary to warn because this protest, after all, no one could foresee what it would be capable of doing.

It was necessary to prevent the disease of the social body that was already beginning to say that the State was putting us in danger

by not taking the necessary measures to protect bodies in danger of health. Caregivers were clamoring, alarmed, working hard and were contaminated. We lacked everything. We prepared lawsuits, we made banners for the windows, “money for the hospital,” “money for the public hospital,” “health is public...”

State lies arise when the State is afraid, it lies to defend itself by attacking reality. The lie is the weapon of those who have only this, lying to deceive the adversary and to take revenge for the fact that it frightens you. But the present State also lies for pleasure, in the intoxication of exercising this amazing faculty of creating by its word a world for which it alone is responsible and author. And at the same time.

5. The self-institution of society and its limits

A self-organizing civic-mindedness then appeared, it was necessary to believe the caregivers more than to lie to them. Tutorials were published on the internet to learn how to protect more than just oneself, seamstresses made hundreds of masks available in a courageous and voluntary way, people made, ordered, and offered masks for their relatives, neighbors, cousins, friends, and girlfriends.

Mutual aid sites led to mutual aid brigades which soon distributed meals to those who lacked the minimum, we discussed, we argued, we started again, we laughed, we fought again, but it was life taking back its rights.

In the south west of the country, care assistants made masks with old bras, it was funny, colorful, and indispensable, especially in the EHPAD. They laughed at the provocative character of their new attire but protected, with candor and responsibility, far from the manipulative and inconsistent State.

When the confinement had been decreed a fortnight earlier in the so-called EHPAD, only the provident directions had masks. As for the personnel, they entered and left the establishments with a temperature test, arriving and leaving. The security procedures had been left to the discretion of the establishments by the Regional Health Agencies, such as the exact date of confinement. However, these establishments had no access to any tests, and families were definitively excluded from the enclosure, which took on the appearance of a real prison. The State, i.e. the LRAs, had thus left the management of the establishments with a very heavy responsibility. They were at the mercy of an error of appreciation in the face of the virus, at the mercy of the groups that employed them, at the mercy of the State which was being relieved, at the mercy of the families who were alarmed. Crazy loneliness that drives people crazy and bruises them. The State, even in its reticular form, did not play its role of protection at all, neither for the staff, nor for the directors of institutions, nor for the confined elderly.

Confinement in these institutions was clearly not the right solution unless families, caregivers and the elderly were all confined together. The experiment was carried out in Beauvais for a month and was conclusive, zero contamination, but a labour inspector interrupted the extraordinary moment... and put everyone in danger. Tests would have been needed to separate virus carriers from the others and this concerned everyone who entered or lived in the facilities. These tests were put in place on April 5, in the meantime the dead have been gutted and the families have mourned.

6. Covid catastrophe

An EHPAD is today a company. It's listed on the CAC 40 and even with death lurking more than usual, shares are climbing. It's profitable. Speculation on this side of fragile human life is profitable. Can we measure the odious nature of such a statement? It is immeasurable as the loss of humanity. Far from any claim, the old and the old make it possible to make a return on investment for a profitable business, if they have the means, if they are solvent, but there are different consumer segments for this heritage vacuum cleaner and not much for those who have nothing and live in the odors of an abandoned body. They don't exist and if they have been confined, it is less to protect them than to keep overcrowded hospitals from becoming overcrowded. Some doctors said it crudely, wanting to deprive these poor people and their families of their freedom indefinitely. "These people were not supposed to clutter the hospitals. "We are a society of monsters and we acquiesce to the monstrosity, out of cowardice, fatigue, unconsciousness, in the feeling that our responsibility is not total since it is structural and we look back on our lives, on our quarrels, our despairs, our hopes, our fears now. We are sorry, and we do so with our feelings of guilt and also the relief of being able to look old age and therefore death in the face, the one that awaits us too.

The catastrophe is an end, and COVID-19 produces that, the knot that had been tied well is unraveling.

7. Approaching the denouement, on a scale of 1

In the EHPAD where my mother lives, the psychologist is a person at risk from Covid, and she quickly leaves the establishment. She was on a fixed-term contract, it is coming to an end. Our weekly visits that we each made, my sister and I, stopped. My brother who lives abroad can no longer come once a month. The animator does his best, but the so-called social distancing imposed makes it difficult, and every other week he has to take care of his young children.

Then the confinement becomes more drastic. Each resident must stay in his or her own room. Everything shrinks, mission impossible for life. The facilitator tries to go from room to room with the mail and jokes, but it's difficult, my mother is afraid of the virus, she relives her traumas once

again. The staff respond but are afraid, some stop, my mother no longer recognizes the people who are taking care of her, they have a hairnet, a mask, a gown and an over-blouse. Fear invades her world, death lurks.

We have organized with my brother and sister a tour to call her every day, we are almost her only landmarks in empty days between the toilet and the meals served on a tray, noon and evening. She fears that we will forget her sleeping medicine, that we will no longer wash her because once she was actually forgotten. I understand that the Covid killed that day and that the team is suffering. I learned this from a what's up list of families who have been watching the grain for months, and who are warning and angry because they have not been admitted to the bedside of the dying. Disaster then. They also complain that they weren't really warned, that they learned that it was the Covid at the time of the funeral from the croque mort. But without a test, what can we say? Every day for at least ten days I learn of someone's death, sometimes of two people on the same day, and I receive the list of condolence messages. I admire believers and unbelievers alike. To find out who we are talking about, some families send photos. I recognize some of them and I am amazed and sad.

I phone the management to find out if it is the Covid, I have the assistant director, I hear a hesitation and then a "yes it is true". I understand that the truth can only come out and not be told. Or that we will have to constantly go looking for it without being sure to get it. Here there is no lie-holder, but lies by omission. Truth will be the food of strong souls, and of his own, others are not invited to share it. Because some people think they can't stand a food of hard digestion, wouldn't this raw truth destroy them? Or would these families become impossible to "manage". It has to be neutralized, dressed, dosed. And then the trust between the institution and the families is already degraded. We cannot ask for miracles from overexploited and too few caregivers. There were malfunctions during the winter and the exchanges went very badly. Management refuses to trust. They do not know how the truth will be used. This sequence is too complicated. There are a thousand reasons to remain cautious, "not all truth is good, not all truth is bad".

And we are in a situation where lying is ultimately a lesser evil for management, it is otherwise recommendable, tolerable. Everyone lies more or less for the more or less good cause. The situation is crazy and for the residents, it resonates. They have all more or less lived through the war, and the war is there: its symptom is the lie that testifies to this deaf war between the institution and the families. Because in war, one must not inform but disinform the enemy, and so we are, as families, logical conclusions, enemies to be disinformed. More or less, to varying degrees, with intensities that change with the situations to be experienced. But still enemies; it reminds me of my years as a parent...

8. The law, a circular

The Regional Health Agencies (ARS) have issued a circular to the EHPADs. It is not distributed to families and we will understand why. It has a disturbing impact. "The place left to relatives in the decision-making process and in support may be limited by these exceptional circumstances," she said. Such provisions would thus authorize a derogation from the rules of the Leonetti law on the right to benefit from the most appropriate care, which stipulates that any decision must be subject to prior consultation with the patient or his or her family if a decision is to be made. However, a circular cannot derogate from or authorize a derogation from a law, unless another law provides for this possibility, but this is not the case with the law on the state of health emergency of March 23, 2020. The Circular now provides that "any decision must...be the subject of clear, loyal and sincere communication with the entourage...". It therefore authorizes a unilateral decision with subsequent communication. This decision, which would be taken unilaterally by the management of the EHPADs, concerns the continuation of care and admission to the hospital in intensive care. The circular recommends limiting this possibility according to availability. No old person, however valid he was before the Covid, should deprive a young person of a place in intensive care. Finally, the circular is silent on how palliative care should be provided in the institution, when hospitalization has been declared impossible.

It is impossible to know under what conditions this circular was applied in the EHPAD, but how can we not imagine that it was applied in a way that endangered the health and life of the residents, in defiance of the Leonetti law?

9. Responsibilities

Strangeness of the filial bond and the contemporary world. Those who have lost their parents want to sue the management of the establishment and Orpea. The judicialization of the conflict between the common sense of humanity and the way in which we have in fact been dehumanized does not seem to me to be a matter of course. It is true that this dehumanization appeared crude during COVID and was aggravated when the situation led to no longer assisting the dying, but the return to the ordinary is indeed a "return to the abnormal": that of a great relegation of the very old who have become bodies rather than lives. Moreover, some of the dead in this sequence did not die of the Covid, but of slippage, this euphemism for the abandonment of the effort to live linked to solitude; they could not bear the drastic confinement, the absence of bonds, words and tenderness. Taking care of life is not only taking care of the bodies, but making it the point of support for human life, bios/zoé, we have been talking about it for so long but do not know how to get out of this politics of survival. There are cooperative nurseries, but very few EHPAD

cooperatives because you don't have to be dependent to cooperate and the families don't manage to risk such costly gestures when the parents are dependent. I began to imagine EHPAD floors in ordinary buildings, to stop confinement and allow the collective, to get out of places where we only meet old people who know that it is the end. I learned that caretakers had invented forms of EHPAD in the southwest, people live at home but are grouped together for activities, meals. It is not simple, but they are trying because these caregivers no longer wanted to collaborate with ordinary HITCHes. They wanted to give real ripe fruit to their protégés, real care, time to talk after the toilet, to laugh and to love life.

But the ordinary ones are in fact bodies reduced to simple objects of commercial investment, for a return on investment. Mortality will have jumped by 249% in the Paris region between March and May 2020 in the EHPADs. The share prices of the major groups in this old-age economy will also rise.

It will be possible to continue to take exorbitant sums from the family patrimonies of the ascending middle classes of the Fordist period without the need to make new investments since places will have become available. Pretend to protect and speculate in the crudest sense on death.

There are a thousand responsibilities involved, and I fear that lampists will be charged more than the State, the LRAs and these large groups. The secret business law passed quickly during the confinement by our government and our Chamber of Deputies will protect Orpea... Will the LRAs be worried? We will have to follow this closely because criminal justice, revenge and war are three ways to obtain some semblance of reparation for those who are on trial. But if there is to be reparation, I don't believe that it is the function of justice to repair individuals, it is necessary to repair the social body and it is so damaged that I only believe in a political outburst, which would also affect the functioning of the EHPADs. But I may be wrong.

Interlude

Certain colleagues, from the Collège de France, had promised us a reinforcement of the State Leviathan which we would probably not be able to avoid. We would adopt stop-covid tracing and be those serfs who volunteered for fear of death. This eternal fear and bad counselor for whoever wants to live in a democracy. But refusing to be subjected to a condition of being-for-death is at the basis of utopian thought, not denying death, but refusing that it dictates its laws, and preferring to the resignation linked to the thought of death, the organization of fraternal disorder and life in spite of our human condition, thanks to our human condition.

Between Leviathan and utopia, let's say that life has really made its way during this confinement. Sometimes strangely, sometimes awkwardly, but death, however close it was, did not prevail.

The thought of death and the fear it engenders produce “government machines. “The thought of life produces democracy, autonomy, citizen control over safeguard laws.

We undeniably have in France a “machine of government”, which in order to carry out its neoliberal revolution has produced laws of destruction of the social state and “laws of constraint” on living bodies, on free life. This government machine is today disowned by two-thirds of France’s citizens for not having taken measures in time to protect the population and caregivers in the face of the pandemic, and for having lied. The request for a trial for “great culprits”, those of the government, depends on the Court of the Republic. It is possible that they could take place.

Faced with this “government machine,” the French have declared that they trust the health care workers more than they trust the elected mayors, and that they trust the elected deputies with a representative mandate, but that they are no longer in dialogue with their representatives, and that they are merely the transmission belt for government failures under the laws of constraint.

When Saint-Just in the spring of the year II (1794) closed the factional struggle, he was convinced that a revolution could not be won with the laws of constraint and the “government machine” alone. He appealed to civil institutions which, around nuclei of affective communities, would make it possible to consolidate the revolutionary art of living, the love of equality and liberty, and would finally found the homeland as a “community of affections”.

Emmanuel Macron has succeeded in building a government machine, but he cannot count on this community of affections. Those who have shown their civic valour by caring, sewing, teaching their children, teaching their children, supporting their elderly single parents, distributing food baskets to the poor, housing those who had no housing, are radically opposed to this government. Paradoxically, the Covid crisis has made us rediscover the worst as well as the best, the denunciation but also “a society of mutual aid”.

This is why we can fear not only that the laws of constraint will continue to produce their stranglehold on public liberties, but that everything possible will be done to ensure that this community, this paradoxical sociality leaves no traces, will be repressed and challenged. The return to the abnormal would be a return to procedures that in the long term desocialize and lead to a kind of generalized frigidity of ties, a “loss of civil trust.

Always according to Saint-Just, without civil trust, men flee and can no longer think that they are free because they make a link, they end up believing that others are always obstacles to their freedom, even dangers that jeopardize their happiness. Thus begins the reign of war of all against all, the reign of fear and a new kind of civil war. Not a bellicose front with a real war scene, but a class front that does not say its name.

Today this name is “social distancing”, it segments the social body. If telework has been a safeguard, without a place to gather, the social relations of teleworkers risk losing their fluidity, their familiarity, their obviousness and their reflexive efficiency, because it is with others that one invents, projects, criticizes, struggles, teaches...

Assuming that the pandemic is resistant, how will we be able to resist this machine, which, far from protecting us, is defeating us?

The question was a nagging one for revolutionaries: how can a people protect itself from a disastrous government?

The right of resistance was a resource but an ultimate one, and today resistance is violently repressed by a police force that has its hands free through the ordinary state of emergency.

The possibility of judging civil servants, dishonest representatives was a resource, but today it is still necessary for prosecutors to agree to act, to put this justice into action.

It was also possible in the constitution of 1793 to declare a law unacceptable, to censor it, to revoke it. This is called democratic control, and since our rulers talk so often about democracy, we must undoubtedly take them at their word and demand the political institutions that will allow this democratic control to be exercised.

The yellow vests to evoke a so-called democratic regime but where the people no longer have the right to speak of democracy.

To regain the possibility of declaring oneself a democrat, everyone will have to make this democratic control the touchstone of the future regime. It must become the center of our public debate.

We no longer want to be controlled by faulty and despotic government machines, we want to control these machines, and to control ourselves, that is to say, to become once again a sovereign people able to decide under which laws they want to live, even in times of pandemic, especially in times of pandemic.

10. Covid Season 2

What characterizes this second season is undoubtedly the exhaustion of the social actors.

Death lurks in its diminished forms: depression, fatigue, autoimmune diseases...resignation of the nursing staff who do not have the strength to start again in working conditions and therefore scarcity that have not changed. Many people want to change jobs. It is too hard.

The public service is retreating.

The change of course is that of a reinforcement of neoliberal norms and a terrible discourse on social security which of course now has a clear deficit since it has been used to pay partial unemployment benefits.

A world is collapsing everywhere.
 The one that I still believed in a little.
 The one where the law protects a little.
 But the law will still serve to repress more than to protect.
 The establishment of a curfew keeps the warrior's imagination alive.
 Then life loses its right to joyful expansion.
 It is the social places of life as such, friendly, family life itself, which
 are now forbidden by this curfew at 9 pm. Curfew? Life snuff, where are
 the embers?
 So everything was already there in season 1, but it's becoming more
 routine:
 From now on, the cordon sanitaire is established from person to
 person.
 The compulsory mask in the empty streets of Paris on Sundays,
 testifies that this individual can already be ghostly.
 The pressure at work remains.
 The sanitary state disappears.
 In the Ehpad we have had to make an appointment for a visit for a
 month now.
 The politics of the stick infantilizes us.
 Life is shrinking.
 It is necessary to defend society, Foucault affirmed,
 "Society doesn't exist," Thatcher said.
 "A people has only one dangerous enemy, it is its government," said
 my friend Saint-Just.
 Our civic task is to regain our strength, I don't know how, but
 reading, the voice, the simmered food... the beauty must break the silence
 that is beginning to reign.

17 October 2020, Paris

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Volume 7
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Get Used to the Virus (and Forest Fires, and...)? No, Thanks!

Slavoj Žižek

Abstract: This short text is a critical intervention and discussion of the on-going perception and understanding of the pandemic Covid-19, forest fires and other crisis. It criticizes the ideological moralisms and “false exits”, while at the same time, it attempts to propose an way out of the present situation.

Keywords: virus, pandemic, crisis, false exits, ideology

The final words of the dying Big Boss from Hideo Kojima's legendary video game *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* are today more relevant than ever: “It's not about changing the world. It's about doing our best to leave the world the way it is.”¹ They are relevant, but with a new twist added: with draughts, forests burning, and the virus destroying our daily lives, with poverty as the result of the new riches, we have to change the world radically if we want to have at least a chance of leaving it the way it is. If we do nothing, our world will soon become unrecognizable to its inhabitants. And what we are doing is close to nothing - all the talk agreements on the measures against global warming just masks this nothing: “The world has failed to meet a single target to stem the destruction of wildlife and life-sustaining ecosystems in the last decade, according to a devastating new report from the UN on the state of nature.”² To mention just one obvious example analyzed by Mike Davis: the fires destroying vegetation in the West of the US:

“In the late 1940s the ruins of Berlin became a laboratory where natural scientists studied plant succession in the wake of three years of incessant fire bombing. The expectation was that the original vegetation of the region—oak woodlands and their shrubs—would soon reestablish itself. To their horror this was not the case. Instead escaped exotics, most of them alien to Germany, established themselves as the new dominants. The persistence of this dead-zone vegetation and the failure of the plants of the Pomeranian woodlands to reestablish themselves prompted a debate about “Nature II.” The contention was that the extreme heat of incendiaries and the pulverization of brick structures had created a new soil type that invited colonization by plants such as the “tree of heaven” (*Ailanthus*) that had evolved on the moraines of Pleistocene ice sheets. An all-out nuclear war, they warned, might reproduce these conditions!!” on a vast scale. / In the aftermath of Victoria's Black Saturday fires in early 2009, Australian scientists

1 Available at: <https://www.quotes.net/mquote/1040531>

2 Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/15/every-global-target-to-stem-destruction-of-nature-by-2020-missed-un-report-aoe>.

calculated that their released energy equaled the explosion of 1,500 Hiroshima-sized bombs. The current firestorms in the Pacific states are many times larger, and we should compare their destructive power to the mega-tonnage of hundreds of hydrogen bombs. A new, profoundly sinister nature is rapidly emerging from our fire rubble at the expense of landscapes we once considered sacred. Our imaginations can barely encompass the speed or scale of the catastrophe.”³

We (“humanity,” which means: our mode of production and commerce) are not just “destroying nature,” we are setting in motion the rise of a new nature in which there will be no place for us. And is the ongoing pandemic also not an exemplary case of a “new, profoundly sinister nature”? So we shouldn’t worry too much about the survival of nature, of natural forms of life, on the Earth – nature will survive, just changed beyond OUR recognition. So let’s raise the Leninist question: what is to be done? There are four false exits, four things that we should avoid like a vampire avoids garlic.

First, we should NOT use the fact that we are dealing with a combination of many crises as a reason to treat these crises one by one and to engage in particular interventions, even at the expense of others, like those who claim that in our struggle against the epidemic we have the right to neglect a little bit the ecological crisis, or that maintaining law and order is more important than stemming the pandemic. Black Lives Matter protests react not only to police brutality but also to economic on justices; the ongoing pandemic is rooted in our distorted relationship with our natural environment; etc. So when a Trump health official said “biology /is/ independent of politics”⁴ (in order to account for the 200.000 dead in the pandemic as something the US government is not responsible for), he was for certain wrong.

Second, we should NOT conclude that, since we live in a dark time and face a many- dimensional global crisis, some kind of moral progress is needed. Those in power always like such calls for a new ethics as the way out of a crisis, they love to conceive a crisis as an ethical one. When the financial meltdown of 2008 exploded, public figures from the Pope downward bombarded us with injunctions to fight the culture of excessive greed and consummation – this disgusting spectacle of cheap moralization was an ideological operation, if there ever was one: the compulsion (to expand) inscribed into the system itself is translated into personal sin, into a private psychological propensity, or, as one of the theologians close to the pope put it: “The present crisis is not a crisis

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3 Davis 2020

4 Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/20/us-nears-200000-covid-deaths-senior-trump-health-official-biology-independent-of-politics>.

of capitalism but the crisis of morality.” Today, again, similar voices are heard: particular economic and political interventions are not enough, only a new global ethics can show us the way out...

The third false exit is the fake wisdom often heard in our media: there is no easy way out, viral infections and global warming are facts of life and we will simply have to learn to live with them, which ultimately means getting used to the “new, profoundly sinister nature.” This wisdom is false since infections, global warming, etc., are not simple facts of life, they arise out of our interaction with nature and among ourselves - just remember how our air pollution changed during the lockdown in March and April.

Fourth false exit. What is needed today is a clear perception of all the dimensions of the crisis we are in, and a well-coordinated multiple radical social change imposed by such perception. Acting comes after thinking, it should follow thinking. But our enemies also think, although in their own way – the link they see between different crises is best exemplified by dangerous metaphoric short-circuits; say, in parallel with “Covid-free zones,” the Polish conservatives talk about “LGBT-free zones” (or “LGBT ideology-free zones”) which are already declared in one third of the country. Similarly, the pandemic is associated with multicultural mixtures, so that a strong national identity is seen as a form of defense.

So which is the right way to act? We should not wait for one big global Act, we should fully engage in particular struggles and coordinate them with other struggles: to fight global warming and pollution we need Assanges, to fight the pandemic we need a form of global healthcare, to fight racism and sexism we need economic changes. And the form of this struggle?

In his *Logique des mondes*, Alain Badiou⁵ elaborated the Idea of the politics of revolutionary justice at work from the ancient Chinese “legists” through Jacobins to Lenin and Mao - it consists of four moments: *voluntarism* (the belief that one can “move mountains,” ignoring “objective” laws and obstacles), *terror* (a ruthless will to crush the enemy), *egalitarian justice* (its immediate brutal imposition, with no understanding for the “complex circumstances” which allegedly compel us to proceed gradually), and, last but not least, *trust in the people*.

Does the ongoing pandemic not impose on us a necessity to invent a new version of these four features? Voluntarism: even in countries where conservative forces are in power, decisions are taken which clearly violate “objective” laws of the market, like the state directly intervening into industry, distributing billions to prevent hunger or for healthcare measures. Terror: liberals are right in their fear, not only are states forced to enact new modes of social control and regulation but

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5 Badiou 2006

people are even solicited to denounce to the medical authorities family members and neighbors who hide their infection. Egalitarian justice: it is commonly accepted (although it is and will be violated in social reality) that the eventual vaccine should be accessible to everybody, and that no part of the world population should be sacrificed to the virus – the cure is either global or inefficient. Trust in the people: we all know that most of the measures against the pandemic only work if people follow the recommendations – no state control can do the work here.

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Interview with Mladen Dolar: Dialectic at a Standstill? Hegel at the Times of COVID

Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda

We would like to begin with the most obvious of all questions: how did you spend your time during the lockdown? Did you find any philosophically or even more broadly theoretically (or, if you prefer, even practically) interesting thing to say about it?

The lockdown was on the one hand like a sudden emergence of communism: we could be fishermen in the morning and the critical critics in the evening, there was suddenly a lot of free time at hand to devote oneself to hobbies (like playing piano), long walks in the nature (something I rarely have time to do, I fully experienced a true spring after many years) and reading the books one never manages (I reread e.g. Gogol's *Dead Souls* which is absolutely astounding, and equally astounding, for very different reasons, *Gulliver's Travels*; both have some strange oblique bearing on Covid). Even politically, there was an odd spectacle of conservative governments suddenly introducing 'communist' measures of serious social subsidies, state intervention, extolling public health service, even universal basic income, something deemed completely impossible a few weeks before. On the other hand this was like a sudden onset of nightmare. The class antagonism, gender, race and global contradictions became starkly apparent, Covid serving like a magnifying glass. The coincidence of the two, the (apparent) communism and the (very real) nightmare, spelled out in derailment, with no end in sight. If there is a notion that captures this state then perhaps Benjamin's idea of dialectic at a standstill, *Dialektik im Stillstand*, which seems to have been waiting, lying low, for this moment to make its coming out. The standstill involves the heightened tension which is at a crossroads – there was a lot of standstill, but where is the dialectic? The pervasive wish to go back to normalcy is the escape from this tension, which also offered, and continues to offer, a chance of a different path.

To continue with a further maybe naive or, at least, rather general question: What, if anything, is a virus? It appears at first sight to be a mere biological entity. But all kinds of things, it seems, can go "viral". Žižek recently even modified Hegel's famous infinite judgment ("spirit is a bone") such that it reads "spirit is a virus." Virality may not be some-thing, but rather a quality or characteristic that expounds a strange ontological or phenomenal status or maybe even capacity of certain entities? What are your thoughts on this?

At a certain point in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel himself uses the notion of contagion, infection, *Ansteckung* in relation to spirit. This is in the chapter that deals with the struggle of the Enlightenment against superstition: the enlightened pure insight, he says rather surprisingly,

spreads like a perfume or a penetrating infection, and the consciousness notices it only when it's too late. The infection is already widespread, "the struggle is too late, and every remedy adopted only aggravates the disease, for it has laid hold of the marrow of spiritual life." Spirit acts as "invisible and imperceptible", "it infiltrates the noble parts through and through and soon has taken complete possession of all the vitals and members of the unconscious idol; then 'one fine morning it gives its comrade a shove with the elbow, and bang! crash! the idol lies on the floor'." The last part is the quote from Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, it displays how the silent weaving of the spirit (*das stumme Fortweben des Geistes*) undermines the idols that the superstition was holding on to. Hegel further speaks of "the infection by the Enlightenment", implying, by extension, that reason is a virus. This image of spirit as contagion is striking, not only because it depicts the progress of spirit as an effortless viral spread, but more pointedly because this viral infectious quality was traditionally reserved for the powers of sensuality, passions, folly, 'irrational' behavior and beliefs (like superstition); ultimately, matter and the material. There was always the tacit or explicit fear that the material would contaminate the higher spiritual realms. The traditional image is rather that materiality is viral and spirit is there to restrain and contain this contamination. Matter as a disease, spirit as a cure – the spiritual path was paved by purification. Sin is an immunodeficiency syndrome. But here Hegel reverses this image and conceives one part of spiritual advancement as coterminous with the spread of a contagious disease. But only one part, one side – the necessary flip side, its counterpart, is "the action of the negative essence" which presents "sheer uproar and violent struggle". No way that we could simply rely on spirit as contagion.

The idea is tempting to see in the virus something that connects matter and spirit, something at their intersection, a common property they share, if properly conceived, and to construct from there a proposal of a 'viral ontology'. (Think also of a very elementary mechanism of mimesis which hinges on something like contagion (I wrote about it at some length). Virus appears as an external contingent peril, but at the same time it points to a dimension at the (extimate?) core of the human.

There have been many responses to the pandemic. Some thought to excavate its "deeper", discursive, political, economic, or even ecological meaning. This often came with practical suggestions on how to deal with it and what kinds of perspectives or future potential it opens up. One of the most vocal commentators was Giorgio Agamben who published a whole series of texts/interventions that are now collected in the book *A Che Punto Siamo? L'epidemia come politica* (Quodlibet, 2020). As you certainly know, he put to work his entire philosophical apparatus to try to shed light on the current

crisis. Now, this obviously brings up some trivial points: 1) Is (t)his conceptual apparatus instructive and/or appropriate to make sense of the pandemic (and its political, economic, ideological and other diverse implications)? 2) It seems, with Agamben's position as with that of quite a few others, that the statements about the crisis do actually shed some surprising light and sometimes even bring out in surprisingly direct form some tendencies or implication of previous and earlier work. Do you think this is the case (we are thinking for example of the idea that we live in a generalized state of emergency)? Did the crisis become a kind of hermeneutical magnifying glass that allows us to re-read the positions of the respective commentators (as if the rule applies: tell me what you think about the crisis and I tell you what kind of philosophy you have)?

Pandemic in itself is not an event, not in anything like Badiou's sense. Neither were the plagues in the past, the Spanish flu, the natural disasters, tsunamis, comets, etc. There is no deeper meaning or truth to it – except in the very general sense that our social life along with our biological life are contingent and exposed to contingency. A hundred years ago, nobody really asked the question whether the relation to the Spanish flu, with dozens of millions of dead, presented a moment of truth of various philosophies. Did it leave any philosophical trace? Not that I know of, but perhaps because it was more or less taken as part and parcel of the disasters of WW1. In 1755 the earthquake in Lisbon strangely was an odd philosophical event which shattered the Enlightenment faith in a meaningful, rational law-like universe. It was perhaps the first time that the very modern idea of living in a senseless contingent world took hold – look at Voltaire's *Candide*, which, with all its naiveties, is a surprisingly radical manifesto. The pandemic presents a halt, a derailment of the capitalist economy, an opening, hence a possibility of an event, of a serious transformation, a bifurcation. Demonstrating that the present crisis shows how right we were all along in our philosophical stance (like this is the proof of the universal state of emergency, for instance, or to prove yet again how farsighted Lacan was) is obviously not enough. But it is very hard to produce a new turn, badly needed, to make a difference within the enormous avalanche of discourse that the crisis produced, with everybody called upon to comment. One speaks against great odds.

A follow up question: Agamben's position has created, at least the impression or the effect that the crisis brought out some rather strange political and ideological affiliations between parties that one otherwise would not throw into one bathtub (excuse this image) together. This could just

be the effect of a strange mutual misrecognition (which in its own right could open up a whole series of discussion about “philosophy’s politics” if there is any). Some of the so-called “truthers” identified Agamben’s critique of the pandemic measures (of the lockdown and other restrictions) as expression of a political ally. The more or less recent protests in Berlin (in August) showed a surprising liaison of libertarians, conservatives, and others who all aligned under the banner of individual freedom (and Agamben was repeatedly a reference point of this mixed “movement”, if one may misuse this term here). In our understanding this seems to indicate that in the contemporary world (although not necessarily limited to it) the signifier “freedom” and the defense of individual freedoms or the freedom of the individual often and effectively functions in a reactionary way. Clearly, also philosophers – whose task has often been self-defined as presenting and clarifying or determining the concept of freedom – have been prone to it (this had already been Marx’s point). What do you make of this?

Pandemic produced strange bedfellows, with divisions among the left and the right. It seems that both left and right are split along the lines of e.g. wearing masks and complying with the imposed rules, a large part of both poles thinking that stricter measures should be introduced to protect human lives, and the other part thinking that this is an infringement on human liberties and an inadmissible state control. Both left and right are split on how to think ‘bare life’ on the one hand and liberty on the other. The voices on both left and right expressed a lot of concern that the emergency measures could be indefinitely extended once in place (along the lines of Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*), but there is also an inverse perspective: emergency measures involved a ‘communist’ hang (with many quotation marks), with enhanced public spending, investment in public health, social support, even universal basic income, ecological benefits, a tentative suspension of market economy, and one should strive to extend those, hold on to them, universalize some measures that governments were forced to introduce as temporary under duress. There is a good side to emergency, it showed that some insidious practices can be disrupted and that one can imagine a world where this could be sustained. Regarding the bare life, the dilemma imposed itself of stopping the economy in order to save lives. Either economy or the bare life? The whole world seemed to be caught up in this choice. But this is a false dilemma. Poverty kills far more people than Covid, lives of masses of people are far more endangered by the way that economy is run, and if we are to take ‘bare life’ seriously, than we first need a different kind of economy. Measures to protect human life in the pandemic only highlight

how human life is expandable in the ways that capitalist economy is normally run.

As to the defense of freedom and individual liberties being used for conservative agendas, I absolutely agree. As Slavoj Žižek put it, there is nothing emancipatory in not wearing a mask, it’s a false struggle.

One thinker who was, maybe unsurprisingly, a constant point of reference was Michel Foucault (and *the* concept for this context was his concept of biopolitics). He was especially evoked to think through what was and still is going on with the strict measures that were imposed on the populations by the individual states in battling the virus. Let us put this as bluntly as possible: does the notion of biopolitics have the conceptual capacity to help to analyze instructively the present situation and our predicament? Or does it, as some show, display some structural, but also political weakness, especially in a situation like ours?

I am skeptical about the notion of biopolitics, particularly in the way it has become a buzzword, a passe-partout notion that lost any useful meaning (with Foucault, it definitely had the value of pointing to an extremely important historical shift, even if in many ways unsatisfactory). But let me take a different path and continue along the lines of the previous answer. There is another theoretical turn that seems to have been waiting for its moment and found a perfect opportunity with the pandemic, namely Lacan’s elaboration of alienation in *Seminar XI*, the *vel* of the forced choice, epitomized by ‘your money or your life’. As an aside, Jack Benny (the immortal Hamlet in Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be*) used to do a famous gag where a mugger holds him up in a deserted street: ‘Your money or your life.’ When he doesn’t stir, the mugger gets impatient and aggressive, repeating ever more threatening ‘Your money or your life, buddy’. After an infinitely long pause Benny says: ‘Hmm... I am thinking it over.’ It seemed for some time, and it still does, that the world governments were largely saying ‘Hmm, we are thinking it over’. The point of Lacan’s demonstrational device is that if faced with this dilemma, one can only choose one’s life, the other alternative, choosing money, is void, an empty set, since one would thereby lose both life and money. And by choosing the only forced alternative, one retains life, but curtailed, *écorné*, life without money, the intersection of two circles, ‘life with money’, being lost anyway. But is the choice of life, indeed bare life, the only way to squeeze out of this predicament? I always thought that capitalism can be defined precisely as choosing the seemingly impossible circle of money, thereby not simply losing life, but keeping the life at the intersection, i.e., life as subservient to and encompassed by the circle of money. You can keep your money and your life, but only

with life expandable in relation to the accumulation of money. (For the historical underpinnings of that, cf. Jacques Le Goff's wonderful booklet *Your Money and Your Life*, 1986; oddly, the title of the English translation, *Your money or your life*, misses the point). The accumulation of money is fuelled by life, increasingly reduced to that function, as a cost to be reduced, and the other alternative, the choice of life without money, bare life, as it were, appears as an empty set. Thus capitalism is not simply alienation, but rather an attempt to circumvent alienation, to seemingly keep both life and money, but at the cost of an enormous curtailment. As for biopolitics, this provides a different entry point, not the relation of sovereignty to bare life (and this is the subtitle of Agamben's *Homo sacer*), but the political economy as the real of biopolitics. This seems to be the blind spot of Agamben's account; it's not that the state of emergency displays the real of politics, i.e., the reduction to bare life by stopping economy; it's rather that economy, in its normal run, is the politics of reduction to bare life.

With Agamben, it's rather strange, and I guess symptomatic, how the radical thought of biopolitics, sovereignty, bare life, state of emergency, etc. could be easily translated into the liberal defense of individual rights against the state infringement. Is this the prospect?

Some, maybe many, and especially on the left, perceive the state as an enemy. There is a widespread and profound distrust of the state and its actions, decisions, etc. And, of course, there are very good reasons for this distrust. But we wondered if the pandemic has not actually added another dimension or aspect to this discussion and we might best articulate it in the following question: Can the state have an emancipatory function (perhaps here the reference would be Hegel and not Marx), or is this as paradoxical as stating that we are in the situation where there is not the "state and (then the) revolution", but "the state as revolution"? How do you see the relevance of the state in our contemporary, viral present? That is to say, can the state be turned into a site of collective emancipation, rather than just serving as an apparatus that ensures the reproductive expansion of the anarchic movement of capital?

In 1917 Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*, a text leading up to and paving the way for revolution, with the prospect of revolution dismantling the state as an apparatus of class oppression; not just that particular oppressive and reactionary state, but state as such, as an instrument of oppression by its very concept. Curiously and by sheer coincidence, in 1917 Franz Rosenzweig discovered a short manuscript which became famous as 'the oldest systematic program of German idealism', co-

written by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling in the aftermath of French Revolution. There they expounded that there can be no idea of the state since it contradicts the very idea of an idea, it contradicts freedom, it treats human beings mechanically as cogwheels, therefore it must cease (*also soll er aufhören*). In the aftermath of the revolution, the three young lads entertained the idea of doing away with the state as such, and Lenin as if picked it up in view of another revolution. But Hegel's subsequent development could be rather summed up by "*Revolution and State*" – his problem was, particularly in his *Philosophy of Right*, how to conceive of a state that would capture the spirit of revolution and find a form that would make it endure, that could be an enduring social form of freedom. Revolution by its own logic could only run amok by the frenzy of its own negativity, hence the necessity of the state. So state as the result of the revolution, not revolution as the undoing of state. This is in line with Hegel's basic move that negativity must have a positive expression. I am in sympathy with this basic Hegelian move, and I think that there was a big deficiency on the left not to have come up with a theory of the state, merely seeing it as an opponent to be abolished. This came back with a vengeance, in Stalinism and all the 'really existing socialism', with the imposition of the worst kind of state as a monster. The point would be to see the state not simply as an enemy or an ally, but as a site, a site of political struggle, not simply conceiving politics as something that happens outside and against the state – indeed the oxymoronic 'state as revolution'. The agenda of undoing the state has in the meantime become the right-wing neoliberal agenda, where they managed to defuse state mechanisms far more successfully than any left wing politics, in order to give the alleged free reign to economy, while at the same time, when deregulation leads to disaster, imposing the biggest state intervention into economy in human history, with the colossal bail-outs in the wake of 2008 crisis.

The pandemic has produced effects on at least three levels: on that of public health, that of economy, but also the level of mental health. The statistics concerning the latter are worrying (depression, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, etc.). Do you see any specific (new, old or just renewed) function of psychoanalysis in the pandemic situation?

I am not a practitioner, so I have no direct experience of how the Covid crisis affected analytic practice. I hear from my analyst friends that a lot of it massively moved to Zoom, and I can't quite imagine how the basic simple parameters of the analytic situation that Freud proposed can be maintained, or adapted, and whether this is sustainable in a longer run. Even in the academic sphere, which suddenly largely happens through Zoom, I don't think this can be maintained without a huge loss; it's a

maimed surrogate, so this goes all the more for the analytic practice where this has far more intimate consequences.

I think psychoanalysis was in bad trouble before, in serious crisis in comparison to its heyday in the seventies and the eighties that I have a very vivid memory of. Partly because of the massive psycho-chemistry industry, with pills for every psychic disturbance (with anti-depressants at the top of the list), partly because of the rise of a vast variety of therapies, apparently efficient in the short run (from cognitivism to new-age), partly because of the sad sectarian in-fights among the analysts and their organizations (nothing sadder than Lacanians viciously fighting other Lacanians as to who is the true Lacanian, not noticing how they are becoming collectively irrelevant thereby), and above all because of the decline of the impact of critical thought in the neo-liberal times, which has multiple causes and where psychoanalysis shares the fate of others. One could hope against hope that this crisis may offer an occasion for a theoretical and practical renewal that psychoanalysis badly needs, as does the critical thought at large. One can be reminded that it was after WW1 that Freud wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one of his most far-reaching texts, occasioned also by a response to a catastrophic crisis brought by the war and its aftermath.

Crises always open the space for interventions, measures, and actions of different kinds (political, economic, ideological, etc.). In our current situation, it thus far seems that the right, in some parts of Europe, proved quite capable in hegemonising interpretations and interventions. In Germany, it was rather the conservative powers who did, at least in the beginning, quite a successful job in containing the situation (it remains to be seen how the situation in the US or India will evolve). But if a crisis can present an opportunity for a political intervention, did you see any relevant proposal from any European or International left? What is your view of the current political situation?

It seems nevertheless that some moderately left governments, like New Zealand, Scandinavian countries (with the strange exception of Sweden), etc. were the most successful in containing Covid, and that new right-wing leaders like Trump, Johnson, or Bolsonaro, were among the most pernicious and harmful for their populations. The epidemic gave rise to a lot of fear and anxiety, the breeding ground of populism, but they rather displayed sheer incompetence and disregard for people's lives. There are too many exceptions for this rule of thumb to quite hold, and the data for many countries (like India) are largely unreliable. But this is just judging from the available data, but facts are not quite the name of the game, there is indeed a battle for hegemony and ideological interpretation going

on where the right appears to have the upper hand, where disasters can be presented as victories. This is the time when what would be most dearly needed is an international association of the left, linked to the new rise of the green movement, with a common minimal agenda, like the boost of public health, the concerted protection of the most exposed and vulnerable, the radical ecological measures, universal income in some form etc. Where is it? Who will seize the moment? Varoufakis's Progressive International, conceived together with Sanders? I very much wish that such initiatives may gain momentum. But the situation is such that help may come from completely unexpected quarters, sparked by a contingent constellation; it's ripe for a spark.

There is barely any left government in Europe left (be it social-democratic, socialist, or whatever). Certainly, the traditional left proved incapacitated so many times already and so inapt to propose basic solutions to fundamental problems that it barely deserves the name (of the left) – which led Badiou to suggest that one should simply stop using the terms of left and right altogether. But on top of the absence of the “left” – whatever we mean by this – from positions of power, the EU seems to be totally out of sync with actual political decision making processes. Everything – maybe tragically – seems to point to its unavoidable dissolution (the ongoing refugee situation is not even mentioned in times of the virus). Is there any future for Europe in and after the virus?

There was a time in the nineties when the vast majority of European governments were left-wing, kind of, and this is the crucial time to consider in view of the present situation. Namely, the neoliberal hegemony that we witnessed in the past few decades could only succeed when the left actually largely espoused it as the platform within which they could parade as ‘the right with a human face’. People like Blair, Clinton, and Schröder made it possible that the neoliberal agenda could gain general currency and be presented as acceptable, even the only viable, while in the eighties Reagan and Thatcher still appeared as extremists and fundamentalists. The left then abandoned the agenda of a lasting social transformation, something that moderate social democrats like Brandt, Palme, and Kreisky still stood for in the seventies – they would be considered as dangerous leftists today, while we spurned them at the time as meek reformists. Today Piketty seems to be something like a reincarnation of their spirit. The left then adopted the neoliberal assumptions and shifted the terrain of the political strife to the question of the degree and shading – do we want a bit more or a bit less state intervention or deregulation or welfare state? The difference between the left and the right tends to be defined by cultural, not political, agendas,

increasingly so. Given that the left largely espoused the neoliberal agenda, and was only able to function as a reaction against rightist moves without having a project of its own, this also resulted in the absence of a serious response to the 2008 crisis, which should have been the wet dream of the left.

Despite the sad state that Europe currently presents, and which looks even sadder with the Covid crisis, I still think that fighting for Europe is absolutely necessary, and that abandoning EU as a hopeless case is no solution. In the global context where US, China, and Russia loom large as the biggest players, Europe stands for the possibility of a prospect of another political agenda, even if tentatively and modestly negatively defined against the three above. Perhaps not much, but something to hold on to; an incentive to desperately fight for solidarity, social justice, liberty and equality which are the essential European legacy, to be reinvented.

One of the characteristics of the self-declared left critique consists in reflecting on new, or at least specific and conjunctural phenomena (say, Bolsonaro, or Trump) by recourse to old categories or concepts (insinuating for instance, that they are fascist). We tend to disagree with this trend, since it does not only express a lack of historical specificity but even more so an unwillingness to be irritated by what is unpleasant to confront. If we take Bolsonaro as one case, we will see that Catholicism and neo-Pentecostalism were instances in Brazil that among other things played a determining structural influence in his election (so one should take into account the historically specific status of the Workers' Party, the nature of the populist left in Brazil, etc.). Of course, this election must also be comprehended against the background of the right assimilating nominally anti-corruption politics (from the left) – simply because when the corrupt are in power, they redefine what corruption is and in the specific case of Brazil against the background of Rousseff's corruption charges and the entire leftist politics of Lula (who learnt from the right and started handling corruption strategically). We do not think we live in a classically fascist period and find it even more absurd to seek to trace proto-fascist elements in contemporary discourses (as if before there is fascism, there are already traces of fascism). It is quite clear that if fascism is a name for a politics that classically included both economic and political directives, today's capitalism simply does not provide the economic basis for early 20th century fascism. So, our (very schematic) thesis is that what we are seeing with the alt-right

is something else; a reactionary or even obscure novelty, new obscurantism and reactionaries. This might certainly get much worse, but it deserves a new analysis and its logic needs explicitation. Would you agree that there is strangely something different, if not new going on on the right and the same does not hold true for the left? If this were the case, does this indicate an exhaustion or saturation of a certain logic or idea of the left?

I won't say anything about Brazil, your question shows a much better grasp of the situation there than I have, so I can only largely agree. And I definitely agree about the use of the term fascism. I guess it shows a certain inertia of thought on the left, with all the new alarming phenomena being put under the heading of the avatars of old phenomena. Any excess or any display of authoritarian measures is quickly labeled as fascism, a handy and extreme marker that appears a bit like a black hole, and the fact that one uses it can function as the alibi of one's radical stance. There are several problems with that: first, the very term fascism stirs up immediate affective reaction and can be used as an easy trigger, and its message is most often: don't reflect, but react. The label calls for immediate and strong reaction. It also has an immediate effect of stigmatization, the opponent is stigmatized instead of being addressed, considered as stupid and blind, thus an occasion for proving our superiority. The use of this term is mostly not something that can change things, it often makes them worse. But the problem is not only with the way this term most often functions, but also with its content. The new populisms present surprising new facets that confound their critics. Terry Gilliam, of Monty Python fame, famously said that "not even the Pythons in their 1960s pomp could match the surreal madcap nature of the presidency. [...] The reality is funnier than anything one can do." Trump is a better parody of himself than any parodist can do. The new leaders are often designated as clowns and buffoons (Berlusconi was paving the way), which doesn't impede their political agenda, but enhances it. The obscene underside of power has come to the fore, in massive and incredible ways, which would have undone any previous power, but now functions as its asset. 17,000 lies and more can be told, all easily checked, without this having any consequences – which gives a whole new dimension to the paradox of the Cretan liar. It's not that now the usually hidden and repressed content has made its coming out, so that we could witness the concealed truth of power; it's rather that the repression itself has become repressed, I guess to an unprecedented degree, the more the obscenity is out in the open. The Emperor acts as if he takes off his clothes and enjoys displaying his nudity (I am following the cue of an excellent text by Yuval Krennitzer, *The Emperor's New Nudity*, soon to be published), which coincides with utmost obfuscation. This shifts the very notion of ideology and its classic parameters. Furthermore,

there is the sheer inconsistency of statements and policies (cf. the array of Trump's contradictory lines about Covid), different in tenor and scope from the 'old right', and also following a different logic than fascism. The paradox is to pursue a consistent political line made of blatant inconsistencies, but a line that sticks and cannot be halted by debunking inconsistencies. And there is a new logic of transgression, in particular transgression of unwritten rules that form the texture of society, let's say the rules of common decency, civility, respect and dignity – a seemingly daring constant transgression that serves the preservation of the status quo and its enhancement. The populist politics is fuelled by a deep anti-establishment sentiment (deep state, swamp, etc.), which is immediately put into the service of the protection of the establishment. The specter of corrupt establishment is maintained for the rage to continue, so that the real establishment can remain intact.

I am enumerating a bit haphazardly some traits and paradoxes (there are more) of the new populism which cannot be covered or usefully dealt with by squeezing them under the label of fascism. The trouble with this is that the left (including myself) is pretty good at drawing up a gloomy picture, but there is the danger that this still betrays a fascination with it and fatefully allows it to occupy the center-stage and set the agenda. We spend our time in awestruck indignation, helplessly reacting to ever new horrors that one deemed impossible a week ago. I guess the only way out of this is, well, to start doing politics, instead of righteous indignation, not as a reaction, always some steps behind, but on our own terms – a promise of this could be sensed with Bernie Sanders, before the Democratic establishment opted for the return to the old normalcy which produced Trump in the first place.

To follow up: what is so seductive about identity politics, political correctness, populism, etc., that the left seems to have embraced? If against previous left wing rule-violations have been assimilated by the right (who are right now breaking all rules constantly) and forced the left into a political correct mode of operation, this seems to be a deadlock (as this makes for a left that can only insist and reiterate rules of behavior and rules of discourse and thus sounds rather quite conservative in the classical meaning of this denomination). Do you see anything emancipatory in any of this and if not, how to break this unhappy conundrum? Does the current pandemic offer a potential way out (since now it is the rather right wing forces governing that have to impose rules of behavior)?

Regarding identity politics I can make two brief general comments, from the psychoanalytic and the Hegelian perspective. Tellingly, the key term

in psychoanalysis is identification, not identity. Identification entails a contradictory process full of tension and with uncertain results. It's a process, not a state of identity that one would have to protect and perpetuate. Thus any sexual position is ridden with the impossibility of coming to terms with the sexual difference, which is not the difference masculine/feminine (if the sexual difference were reducible to this simple binary, there would be no need for psychoanalysis). There is a real of sexual difference irreducible to a binary opposition, ultimately to the signifier, and irreducible to a positive identity. Lacan has a great formulation for this: it is what doesn't cease not to be written, yet haunting any given oppositions, exceeding the binary logic. The multiplicity of sexual positions is the response to this impossibility, but the assertion of this multiplicity doesn't resolve its deadlock. Of course one should fully endorse the struggle of all sexual 'identities', their right for full recognition, but this is not enough – one should show fidelity to a kernel of antagonism that they all have at their core and which prevents us from ever simply inhabiting any sexual identity. This tends to get lost in the assertion of the multiplicity of positions which all have equal rights and entitlement. The sexual politics that psychoanalysis proposes is far more troubling, it doesn't aim only at the external proponents of oppression, but at the inner rift implied by sexuality. (I cannot do better but to refer to Alenka Zupančič's book *What is sex?*)

As for Hegel, one should just keep in mind the general caveat that any identity is premised on a split, and that any identity is subject to self-othering (*Sichanderswerden*), being itself only on condition of becoming other than itself, and measured against the other at its core. There can be no Hegelian identity politics.

Following these two cues one can see that the deadlock of asserting the identity politics and political correctness on the one side, and following the path of daredevil transgression on the other is fatally misconceived. Asserting identity politics tends to betray what identities have at their core, the antagonistic inner edge (as opposed to external enemies), and seemingly daring transgression ultimately sustains the power structures that it is allegedly transgressing. It's a quid pro quo, indeed a conundrum hard to undo, the two strands often fuelling each other. As to what one can do – well, pursuing the Hegelian-Lacanian line at this particular intersection (concerning identity and transgression), but this then poses the larger question of what philosophy can do in these times.

During the lockdown, one of the claims spread everywhere was: "we are all in the same boat". But, we have seen the "emergence" or the new visibility of a fraction of the working class, so called essential workers. Would you say they can be accounted for in the terms of Marx's analysis? And if so, what does one do with the idea that there was a widespread

recognition of the achievements and efforts of the essential workers (of people whose work is so essential that without them the functioning of society would come to a halt) that immediately after the virus seem to have disappeared or lowered its impact were again forgotten and disappeared into the invisibility of the supermarket checkout counters and the like? First there was literal acclamation (in Italy people stood on their balconies and applauded the supermarket cashiers), then there was a demand for higher wages, and then all this disappeared with the objects of the acclamation. What does this mean for the idea of (the) essential work(ers)? Can Marx and the critique of political economy in general help the conditions of the pandemic?

If the pandemic showed anything, then that we are not in the same boat. The inequalities and antagonisms deepened and drastically came to the fore. There was a graffiti in Ljubljana 'Homeless, stay at home!' The drastic differences of those who have a home to stay at, and the people in appalling housing circumstances, the gender differences, with women being far more exposed in caring and medical professions, as salespersons, plus subjected to increased domestic violence, the carnage of the old (no countries for old men), the penury of the precarious workers, the looming poverty, the exposure of racial and ethnic minorities. The image of all being in the same boat has the further hidden implication that boats are hierarchical entities, there is a captain at the top and some officers in command, and the others are to obey the orders. It seems to proclaim equality, but it does the opposite, hence the boat is a propitious ground to introduce authoritarian measures under the cover of all being equally vulnerable. The message is: because we are all equal in regard to the virus you should concede 'our' unquestionable power for your own good.

The talk about essential workers rather obscures some things. First, such talk obscures the real problem of the role of the state and the public services. Only a well-organized public health service can deal with such an emergency situation (but not only that, also the health care freely available for all), and the general thrust for privatization and deregulation impoverished and depleted this service in the decades of neoliberal policies – the degree of it became glaring under the harsh light of the virus. There was a moment of consensus about that in the spring crisis (if unwilling and frail), but quickly forgotten once the peak danger seemed to be over. Nothing was seriously done in the past six months to avert and mitigate the current second crisis, with the looming new disasters. The 'essential' health workers are now even more exploited and poorly paid, and nobody applauds them any longer.

Second, the larger issues of the visibility of the working class – indeed it's invisible in the normal conditions, and this doesn't relate

merely to workers producing and distributing our food, the one thing we cannot do without even in the pandemic (plus electricity and internet providers, at the very opposite end of bodily needs, but they are not exposed) – it's the millions of invisible workers conveniently out of sight in faraway countries and their sweatshops. Capitalism is also a distribution of visibility, a politics of visibility, and with the sudden pandemic emergence of 'essential' workers some part of the invisible has become visible, only to be soon eclipsed. There is a class struggle in what you see or what you don't, and with the occurrence of 'essential' workers there is the impression, or rather the fantasy, that one suddenly somehow sees the essence – namely, that we all need to eat and to use the net, at the minimal. Stomach or fantasy, as Marx put it on the first page of *Capital*, but they always overlap.

The contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism are becoming even more irreconcilable than before, especially during the lockdown or during the pandemic as such. Rich people need working poor people, so that they do not get infected and can still command the poor people to deliver their food, etc. It seems like it is impossible to think that capitalism has the ability to overcome or sublimate them in any way in its own framework – and it seems increasingly unbelievable that it will not simply explode into many tiny pieces of structure (*zonages*, as Badiou would have it). On the other hand, capitalism never solved its problems, it only delayed them and transformed them so that they can be left unsolved. Where do you think we stand today, especially under the current intensified conditions? Does all this put an alternative, communism (whatever we precisely mean by this) on the agenda? Differently put, did the pandemic force us to consider a radical transformation of our economy, society, politics, etc., (in short: communism) or do you think the pandemic is separate from the insight into such an almost conceptual necessity?

One of the immediate consequences of Covid, I guess now prevailing, is the sense of fatigue. There was the crisis in the spring, and as it dragged on the sense of fatigue was already setting in, but that was still very limited as compared to its autumn repetition, this bad remake that we are facing now; this rehashing of a bad script is even more disastrous. Now we can't even muster the proper emotional response, as we did with the original shock, with horror or anxiety or cynicism. This isn't even frightening or an occasion for humor, not anymore, which makes it worse. Fatigue is the opposite of awakening, and when Benjamin brought up the dialectic at a standstill, it was meant as the state of maximum

tension which was to instigate awakening. The images of standstill, now again imposed on our cities under lockdown, seem to be oneiric, like the dreamlike Hollywood sequences (think of e.g. *Vanilla Sky*). But Benjamin's point is that dream doesn't pertain to the standstill, dream was what went before, i.e., capitalism and its business-as-usual, its reliance on progress etc., so that the standstill offers the chance to wake up from this protracted collective dream, the phantasmagoria. Now we seem to be at the point of excessive fatigue which rather instigates indifference and irritation. Can it bring us to some form of awakening? The accumulation of the quantity of exasperation and apathy leading to a 'dialectical overturn' into a new quality? I rather suspect that both the optimistic scenario of awakening and the pessimistic scenario of this dragging on into the bad infinity of dulled frustrated discontent may be off the mark. The accumulation of contradictions is such that this may explode in unpredictable ways. Of course I hope against hope and try to do what I can to keep the 'communist' scenario alive, in whatever incipient organizational forms it exists (also in Slovenia), and in the reliance on sparks that are in the air and may ignite anytime. It's a harsh uphill struggle against the incredible human capacity to learn nothing from even the starkest lessons and to delude oneself till the last possible moment (and beyond). After the 2008 crisis there was the general feeling that 'this can't go on', and now with the Covid and the concomitant intensification of antagonisms there is again 'this can't go on'. Come to think of it, given my age, this was the general feeling already in the aftermath of '68, so in retrospect our generation spent a lifetime in this temporality, the looming breakdown of capitalism in its present form, the accumulation of contradictions, the receding breaking point. And I guess this stretches back to Marx's time. But maybe when, after so many thwarted expectations, we all get resigned to the idea of the infinitely expandable capitalism and its temporality of infinite postponement, then a break may surprise us from some completely unexpected quarters. There is the danger of one delusion – of the infinite resilience of capitalism – being matched by another delusion – that of an imminent end. Capitalism is, perhaps since ever, the perspective of an end that doesn't end. I do believe that this nightmare of a never-ending end has a limit, but this is a paradoxical belief where radical fatalism, as proposed by Frank Ruda in *Abolishing Freedom*, meets revolutionary will.

The very existence of philosophy has been questioned for a very long time now, at least since Hegel himself, for whom there were only failed attempts to do philosophy and thus there was no proper philosophy, well, almost before Hegel. From Stephen Hawking to the average neuro-biologist, there are quite a few who'd argue that it is better if there was no philosophy at all (because it does not help and is a waste

of time anyhow). You belong to the kind of philosophers who passionately and rigorously defend the necessity of philosophy. Even, or precisely because it is for its own sake. How do you think of philosophy, perhaps with Hegel, in times of pandemic?

Defending philosophy, for its own sake, as a space of thought beyond any immediate utility and practical use, feels a bit, in these times, like a belief in magic. The magic that pure thought can have consequences, that persevering with it, as such and for its own sake, will make a difference – if thought is on the level of its task. There is, yet again, the peril of a delusion of grandeur that philosophy has been prone to throughout its history. We have such great ideas, if only people would heed them. But this idea, the idea of the idea, as it were, goes back to the origins of philosophy, to its basic stance stated first by Parmenides, of co-belonging of thought and being. That thought touches upon being, intersects with it, that it interrupts being (this is Hegel's wonderful formulation, thought is interruption of being, *Unterbrechung des Seins*, so that neither thought nor being 'exist' independent of this interruption, a break). So this is not about giving pure thought free reign apart from the troublesome dirty worldly business, but about the capacity of thought, if properly practiced, to stir being, in the juncture of its universality and the singularity of a historical moment it belongs to, including and especially its dirt. I guess this stance is in my case experientially based in the beginnings of my involvement with philosophy, in the late sixties and the early seventies, when there was a heyday of both serious thought going around and the political action, the intoxicating intersection of the two. This was the moment that inspired the proper enthusiasm, and here I am, fifty years later, trying to show fidelity to that moment, against great odds. But I am of course fully aware that this can be a very conservative stance, the mythification of a certain period when everything seemed possible, philosophically and politically, and then everything went downhill ever since. The thing is not that the glorious moment is gone and the world has radically changed, so that one is like a stranded relic of some other times, the thing is rather that that moment happens now, if it's worth anything.

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